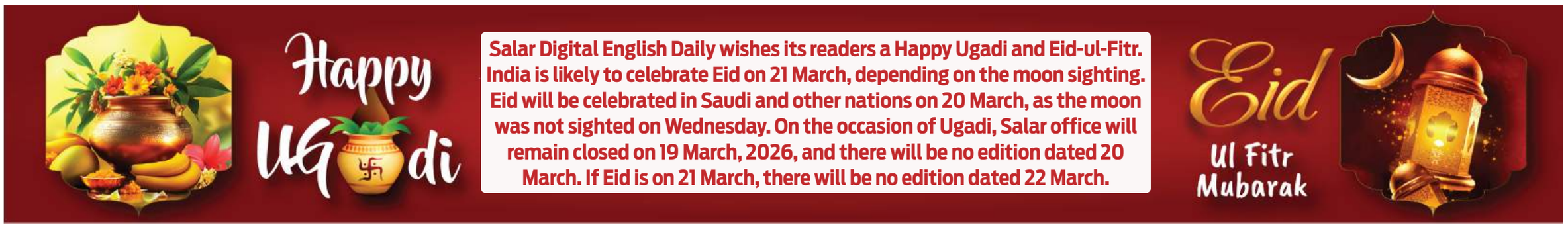
Happy
UGadi
Salar Digital English Daily wishes its readers a Happy Ugadi and Eid-ul-Fitr. India is likely to celebrate Eid on 21 March, depending on the moon sighting. Eid will be celebrated in Saudi and other nations on 20 March, as the moon was not sighted on Wednesday. On the occasion of Ugadi, Salar office will remain closed on 19 March, 2026, and there will be no edition dated 20 March. If Eid is on 21 March, there will be no edition dated 22 March.
Eid
Ul Fitr
Mubarak

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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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With Taj Mahal ad, US gives Indians $2,600 to self-deport

Poster offers free air tickets, says fly to India

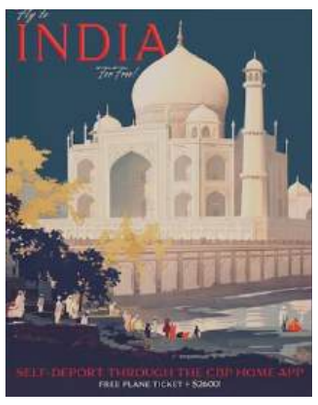
WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has announced free flights and an exit bonus of USD 2,600 for illegal immigrants, including those from India, to return voluntarily to their home countries under a self-deportation initiative.

Promoted through social media posts featuring landmarks such as the Taj Mahal, the campaign carried slogans like "Fly to India for free!" and "Free plane ticket + USD 2,600," urging migrants to "go home with a fresh start".

Under the programme, migrants opting to leave will receive cost-free travel, waiver of fines and a USD 2,600 stipend. The process is facilitated through the CBP Home App, which allows users to register their intent to depart, organise travel and access assistance. Participants will also be deprioritised for detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement while preparing to leave.

The initiative, part of "Project Homecoming" launched after Donald Trump's second-term inauguration, has seen over 2.2 million migrants opt for self-deportation since January 2025, according to DHS. The department said the scheme significantly reduces costs, estimating a self-deportation at USD 5,100 compared to USD 18,245 for enforced removal.



The Department of Homeland Security shared a post featuring an image of the Taj Mahal, stating: 'Fly to India for free!', 'Free plane ticket + USD 2,600, 'Go home with a fresh start' -X | @DHSGOV)

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem urged undocumented migrants to "self-deport now", warning of fines, arrest and permanent bans otherwise.

However, the campaign has sparked criticism, particularly over the use of the Taj Mahal. Social media users and opposition leaders, including the Congress, termed it "insensitive" and "humiliating".

"The Trump administration used the image of the Taj Mahal in a poster to label Indians 'aliens'. Think about that. An entire country is being insulted, and our Prime Minister remains silent," Congress wrote on X.

"This is not just offensive. It is humiliating. And it is happening because we have a COMPROMISED and cowardly Prime Minister, too weak to stand up. Shame!" it added.

Other users called it an embarrassment for India, with one comment reading, "India keeps hitting new lows of humiliation under the present govt. This is the reality. Shameful. The Trump administration should be ashamed." ocial media users responded with sarcasm and memes to the department's post on X.

One user wrote, "Can US citizens get $2,600 instead?", while another said, "What amazing use of taxpayer dollars".

"Can you send me some cash for being a legal, employed, natural-born citizen who contributes to society?" another user asked. —*PTI*

FESTIVE MOOD TAKES OVER

Bengaluru markets bustle as women shop for bangles on the eve of Ugadi, while a young girl gets her henna applied ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr on Wednesday —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

Dated us, married Modi: Kharge to Deve Gowda on last RS day

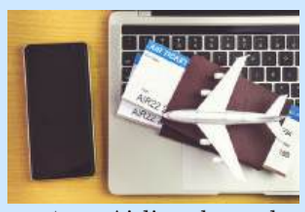
NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Rajya Sabha witnessed a rare light-hearted moment on Wednesday as Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge bid farewell alongside retiring member and former prime minister HD Deve Gowda. In his farewell speech, Kharge reflected on his long parliamentary journey before taking a playful dig at Deve Gowda. "I have known him for 54 years... he dated us, loved us, but married Narendra Modi," he quipped, triggering laughter across the House, with the Prime Minister himself seen smiling. Gowda later hit back saying that he was in a "forced marriage" with the Congress but had to "divorce" the national party because it was an "abusive relationship". Deve Gowda had headed the United Front government in 1996 with Congress support. His party later allied with Congress in Karnataka in 2018, forming a government under his son, HD Kumaraswamy, before its collapse in 2019. The JD (S) later aligned with the BJP. Deve Gowda was among 37 retiring members honoured during the Budget session. Modi reserved special praise for Gowda, Kharge, and NCP chief Sharad Pawar, calling them stalwarts who have spent more than half their lives in parliamentary proceedings. He further urged the newly elected MPs to learn from them —*ANI*

>>>More on Page 3

Domestic flight can't charge fees on 60% of seats

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH



The government on Wednesday directed airlines not to levy additional charges on at least 60 per cent of seats on domestic flights, aiming to improve passenger facilitation. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has asked carriers to allocate a majority of seats free of charge, up from the current norm where only about 20 per cent are complimentary. Airlines have also been instructed to seat passengers on the same PNR together, preferably in adjacent seats. The move follows growing concerns over high ancillary charges, particularly for seat selection. Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu said the measures include free seat allocation, assured family seating, and transparent norms for carrying sports equipment, musical instruments and pets. He added that enforcement of passenger rights will be strengthened, especially in cases of flight delays and cancellations. —*PTI*

Iran intel head killed; Larijani laid to rest

DUBAI, 18 MARCH

Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz on Wednesday said the military has killed Iran's Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib (pic left), marking the third high-profile assassination of an Iranian leader in two days.

On Tuesday, Israel said it had eliminated top security official Ali Larijani (pic centre) and Basij chief Gholamreza Soleimani (pic right). Iran later confirmed their deaths. Funeral ceremonies for the two leaders, along with sailors from the Iranian naval vessel IRIS Dena, were held in Tehran on Wednesday, according to state media.

Larijani, 67, a key conservative figure, was widely believed to be running Iran after the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in US-Israeli strikes last month. He was reportedly targeted at his daughter's home near Tehran. His son, Morteza Larijani, was also killed. A former parliament speaker and senior adviser on nuclear talks, he had travelled to Oman shortly before the war.

Khatib, a Shiite cleric, previously served in Iran's judiciary and intelligence apparatus and fought in the Iran-Iraq War. Sanctioned by the US in 2022, he was accused of directing cyber espionage and ransomware operations. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Iran's political system remained "very solid" despite the losses. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

China-bound Russian oil ships head to India

The Indian-flagged vessel 'Jag Laadki', carrying UAE-sourced crude oil, docks at Adani Port in Gujarat's Mundra, on Wednesday —*ANI*

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

India is sharply increasing imports of Russian crude as disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, amid the US-Iran war. Tankers originally bound for China are now rerouting mid-voyage to India.

According to a Bloomberg report, one such vessel reversed course in the South China Sea and is now heading to India, with more cargoes likely to follow. Vessel-tracking data shows the Aqua Titan is due to dock at New Mangalore on 21 March with Urals crude loaded in the Baltic Sea. The Aframax tanker had earlier listed Rizhao in China as its destination before altering course in mid-March, shortly after a US waiver allowed India to step up Russian oil imports.

Data from Vortexa indicates at least seven vessels have diverted from China to India. Indian refiners have bought nearly 30 million barrels of Russian crude in a week to offset West Asia supply disruptions.

OIL TANKER ARRIVES IN GUJARAT

Amid this, Indian tanker Jag Laadki, carrying 80,886 tonnes of crude from the UAE, docked at Mundra Port. LPG carriers Nanda Devi and Shivalik also reached Gujarat ports after navigating Hormuz. The shipments underscore India's dependence on imports—about 88% of crude—and the need to diversify supplies.

Centre offers 10% additional supplies to states

With LPG shortages persisting, the Centre has offered up to 10% additional supplies to states accelerating piped gas rollout, while prioritising household consumption.

Meanwhile, 1.67 million tonnes of crude, along with LPG and LNG cargoes, remain stranded on 22 Indian vessels near Hormuz, though all 611 crew are safe. —*PTI*

2.6 lakh

passengers returned to India from West Asia since 28 Feb: MEA

Free passage via Hormuz top priority: Modi to Kuwait

Narendra Modi on Wednesday spoke with Kuwait Crown Prince Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah on the West Asia crisis, stressing safe navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Both backed diplomatic engagement. Modi condemned attacks on Kuwait's sovereignty and thanked support for Indians. It was his second call since the US-Israel strikes on Iran; he has also spoken to several regional leaders. —*PTI*

Bibi releases 6th video to debunk death claims

DUBAI, 18 MARCH

Benjamin Netanyahu has released a sixth video on X in recent days to dispel persistent rumours about his death, following earlier clips including a café appearance and a viral "ring disappearing" video. The latest clip has drawn scrutiny after AI chatbot Grok gave conflicting assessments, initially calling it AI-generated before later saying it was real. In the video, Netanyahu appears with Mike Huckabee, joking, "Yes, I'm alive," and mocking a "six fingers" conspiracy by saying, "We shake hands with five fingers." Huckabee adds that Donald Trump asked him to check on Netanyahu. The Israeli leader also jokes about a "punch card" referencing Iranian leaders reportedly killed in strikes. —*Agencies*

#PEAKBENGALURU

Family tries to parcel man amid high bus fare

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

A family allegedly attempted to send an elderly man in a "parcel" through a courier service in protest against high bus fares ahead of Ugadi and Eid-ul-Fitr, police said on Wednesday.

The incident occurred in the Vyalikaval area of central Bengaluru on Tuesday evening, they said.

Following the incident, Bengaluru City Police Commissioner Seemant Kumar Singh said that action will be taken against the family for staging the act as part of a protest reel.

The footage of the incident that went viral drew criticism, the officer told reporters here.

"A case will be registered against the family. Such incidents send a bad message on social media. So, we will take action," he said.

The family packed the elderly man into a gunny bag and took him to a courier office to parcelled out of Bengaluru —*SCREENGRAB*

According to police, the family of five members approached a private courier centre claiming they wanted to parcel the man as a symbolic message to the public over rising fares in both private and government buses. They claimed it was part of a prank meant to highlight the difficulties of the festival travel.

Startled by the request, the courier staff alerted the police.

During the inquiry, the elderly man's daughter said the act was staged as a protest and to create a social media reel. As part of the stunt, the family had placed the elderly man inside a gunny sack, a senior police officer said.

Police said the situation turned serious when the man experienced breathing difficulties inside the sack. Subsequently, the family apologised to the police and the public for their actions. The family was let off with a warning. —*PTI*

Sara asked to give faith certificate to visit Kedarnath

DEHRADUN, 18 MARCH

Actor Sara Ali Khan may need to submit an affidavit to continue offering prayers at Kedarnath Temple and Badrinath Temple, following a directive by the Badri-Kedar Temple Committee (BKTC).

"If Sara Ali Khan expresses her devotion towards Sanatan Dharma and submits an affidavit, we will allow her to offer prayers," Committee chairman Hemant Dwivedi said, when asked if the actor, daughter of Saif Ali Khan and Amrita Singh, would be allowed to pray at the shrine.

The rule follows a 10 March board meeting where the BKTC unanimously approved a proposal to bar non-Sanatanis from temple complexes and garbhagrihas. The proposal has been sent to the Uttarakhand government.

Referring to Khan, a frequent visitor who starred in 'Kedarnath', Dwivedi said she would be allowed entry if she submits the affidavit. A standardised format has been prepared.

Meanwhile, preparations for the Char Dham Yatra are under way. Over six lakh devotees have registered within 10 days till 16 March. The pilgrimage begins on 19 April, coinciding with Akshaya Tritiya. —*PTI*

CM gives Rs 5L aid for kin of 3 cops killed in crash

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday announced compensation for the families of three police personnel killed in a road accident in Chitradurga district, terming the incident "extremely tragic".

"An amount of Rs 5 lakh each will be provided as compensation to the families of the three Reserve Sub Inspectors who lost their lives in the horrific accident that occurred near Heggere Gate in Challakere taluk of Chitradurga district on Sunday, and Rs 2 lakh each to those injured. This is an extremely tragic incident. I pray that the departed souls find peace and that their families find the strength to bear this sorrow," he said on X.—*PTI*

Belagavi woman dies during wall collapse amid rains

BELAGAVI, 18 MARCH

Unseasonal rains in parts of Karnataka during peak summer have claimed a life in Belagavi taluk. In a tragic incident in Hosur village, Belagavi taluk, a 34-year-old woman was killed after the wall of a dilapidated house collapsed. The deceased has been identified as Parveen Bepari. According to the police, Parveen and her husband, Sharif Bepari, were travelling on a motorcycle to sell poultry when heavy rain forced them to seek shelter under an abandoned structure. The mud-and-stone wall, weakened by continuous rainfall, suddenly gave way, killing Parveen on the spot. Bepari sustained injuries and has been admitted to BIMS Hospital.The incident occurred within the jurisdiction of Kakati Police Station. —*Salar News*

Bengaluru sees another round of hailstorm

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Parts of Bengaluru witnessed hail storm on Wednesday evening around 6.30pm, which lasted for about 15 minutes. The heavy rains resulted in power cut. The City heaved a sigh of relief after the much-awaited rain amid scorching heat. Bengaluru experienced widespread rain with hail in places such as Majestic, Shanthinagar, Kadugodi, KR Market, Jayanagar, Basaveshwara Nagar, Wilson Garden, and Richmond Town. Davangere district also received substantial rainfall, with hailstones reported in several taluks. Chamarajanagar experienced a severe storm, while Kadaba taluk in Dakshina Kannada reported hail. Mysuru, meanwhile, recorded steady rain for nearly an hour. —*Agencies*

15 people banned from C'magaluru for law and order

CHIKKAMAGALURU, 18 MARCH

In a move aimed at maintaining law and order, the Chikkamagaluru district administration has issued externment notices to 15 individuals, including members of the BJP, Hindu organisations, and Muslim groups. The notices have been served under Section 58 of the Karnataka Police Act, 1963, directing the individuals to appear for an inquiry. Among those named are BJP Yuva Morcha district president Santosh Kotyan and Bajrang Dal Hassan division co-convener Shyam V Gowda. According to police records, Kotyan faces around 14 criminal cases registered across various police stations. Of the 15 individuals, 10 belong to the Muslim community and five are associated with Hindu organisations. The authorities have stated that the action is a preventive measure to curb communal tension and ensure public order.—*Salar News*

High-rise curbs choking Bengaluru's growth: DKS

State to decide location of Bengaluru's second airport

NEW DELHI/BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Wednesday said high-rise development in Bengaluru is being severely constrained due to restrictions imposed by civil aviation authorities and defence establishments, impacting the City's growth and urban planning.

He appealed to the Union Aviation Minister Kinjarapu Ram Mohan Naidu in New Delhi on Wednesday to review and increase height limits for buildings.

"We are unable to widen roads much either. On one side, there is HAL Airport, on another Kempegowda Airport, then Jakkur Airfield, and the Air Force base at Yelahanka. Because of this, high-rise construction is not permitted for several kilometres around these areas," Shivakumar told reporters in Delhi.

"Bengaluru Business Corridor is coming up in Bengaluru and these height restrictions may become a hindrance for the project," he added.

"I had proposed a Skydeck project and worked on it for nearly two-and-a-half years, but eventually we had to shift it... HAL imposed restrictions, saying nothing can be done within a 20-kilometre radius," Shivakumar noted.

He said that despite the introduction of premium Floor Area Ratio (FAR), developers are unable to utilise it due to these curbs.

"This is affecting both development and government revenue," he said.

Pointing out disparities with other cities, he said, "In cities like Hyderabad and Mumbai, such restrictions are comparatively less. We have requested that Karnataka be given similar norms as other states, allowing greater building heights."

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar meets Union Aviation Minister Kinjarapu Ram Mohan Naidu in New Delhi on Wednesday —*X@DKSHIVAKUMAR*

STATE WILL DECIDE ON 2ND AIRPORT

"The Centre has shared its feedback on the second airport. It has asked us to finalise the location for the second airport. We have a few options for the location and we will take a decision after weighing the pros and cons," Shivakumar added.

The State government has finalised three potential sites for the second airport; two near Kanakapura Road and one near Nelamangala-Kunigal Road.

DKS LASHES OUT AT NICE ROAD

"After two years of continuous efforts, we have decided to set up sky deck in Kempe Gowda layout. It isn't possible to erect this within a radius of 20km from any airport. We wanted to build the sky deck near Somapura near NICE Road, but they refused to issue NOC (No Objection Certificate). They did not cooperate with the government and we will deal with them," he said.

Asked about protests against NICE Road, he said, "The farmers who lost the land must be compensated, there is nothing wrong in their claim. How will they wait for 25 years for the compensation?"

—*Salar News with agencies*

TOMATO RATES DROP 50%

Iran war casts its shadow on Kolar farmers

KOLAR, 18 MARCH

—*SALAR*

The ongoing war between the US-Israel and Iran has spelled doom for Kolar farmers. Just a few weeks earlier, farmers were reaping a good yield and selling products locally and exporting them. Now, 19 days into the war, there are hardly any takers for their products. As a result, prices have come down drastically.

Kolar farmers sell 60 per cent of their vegetables to Bengaluru. But with several hotels shut or working for a brief period owing to a shortage of LPG cylinders, the demand for vegetables has come down, said Narayana Gowda, Vice President of Karnataka State Ryot Sangha.

He noted that with no takers, the prices of vegetable such as beans, capsicum, peas, carrots and curry leaves have decreased.

Most vegetables are now sold at Rs 15-20 per kg, while mixed vegetable bags are being sold at Rs 4-5 per kg.

"There are no buyers for products such as cucumber and brinjal," he added.

TOMATO PRICES CRASH

Tomatoes, the life line crop of Kolar district, is hit hard. Tomatoes were sent to far off states such as West Bengal, but now traders are unwilling to buy huge quantity, said CR Srinath of CMR tomato mundi. Srinath said only farmers in a radius of around 40 to 50 kms of Kolar are bringing tomatoes to Kolar APMC, which is the second largest tomato market in Asia. Tomato farmers from Tumakuru and Challakere are finding it difficult to transport their products to Kolar.

A 15 kg box of tomatoes was being sold at Rs 300 a fortnight ago, now it is sold at Rs 130 to Rs 150, a 50 per cent drop in prices, he said.

PETRO PRODUCTS HIT

He added that the prices of petro products have risen by 50 per cent. Mulching paper and ropes are used during cultivation and baskets during harvest and transportation.

For instance, prior to the war, they cost Rs 130 per crate, now they are priced at Rs 240.

Traders who provide farmers with raw materials right from seeds to crates are unwilling to invest.

Kolar farmers protested on Tuesday with heaps of vegetables, seeking government attention. —*Salar News*

NO ANSWERS...

Reply to everything by 25 March: Horatti to govt

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Legislative Council Chairperson Basavaraj Horatti on Wednesday set a deadline of 25 March for the State government to furnish all pending replies, warning that action would follow the next day if the direction is not adhered to. Home Minister G Parameshwara assured compliance.

Parameshwara said the government has already initiated steps to address delays in furnishing replies, including issuing notices to departmental secretaries and warning of suspension in case of continued negligence.

"All answers must be provided by the 25th. If not, action must be taken on the 26th and the House should be informed," Horatti said.

This followed concerns raised by JD(S) MLC Bhoje Gowda over the large number of unanswered questions.

"So far, 688 questions have been asked here, but nearly 400 have not been answered... only 277 have received replies," he said.

Horatti on Tuesday briefly adjourned the House over the absence ruling party members post lunch break. Assembly Speaker UT Khader had adjourned the House and walked out on Monday over the lack of replies from departments to questions. —*PTI*

Item songs at cultural events may be banned

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Kannada & Culture Minister Shivaraj Tangadagi on Wednesday said the State government was in favour of imposing a ban on disc jockeys (DJ) playing "item songs" and loud music at cultural events and processions.

The Minister was replying to Cabinet colleague Santosh Lad in the Assembly, seeking a ban on DJs playing item songs during such events.

"In all jayanthis and festivals, DJs have become a big problem. In any jayanthi, our Gods won't move forward (in a procession) without a DJ and an item song. This is shameful. DJs and item songs won't do any good for culture," Lad said.

Tangadagi responded: "The BJP should cooperate. We will issue an order. We should issue an order because DJs are creating a lot of problems. If everyone agrees, it has to be done."

BJP MLA from Shivamogga SN Channabasappa said he was not in agreement.

"They may not want (DJs), but we want it. You cannot do as per your wish and preferences....Ban Azaan as per a Supreme Court order if you can," he challenged.

Intervening, Speaker UT Khader noted the court order was regarding the sound decibel levels. "All governments must follow that." —*PTI*

5,000 ANGANWADIS TO HOST LKGS, UKGS, SAYS HEBBALKAR

Minister for Women and Child Welfare Lakshmi Hebbalkar on Wednesday announced that the State is set to introduce LKG and UKG classes in Anganwadis, alongside the launch of Government Montessoris to enhance early childhood education. Speaking in the State Assembly, Hebbalkar said, "We have already upgraded 5,000 Anganwadis, and we are prepared to upgrade another 5,000 this coming June."

BILLS PASSED TO LEVY AD FEE & TRANSFER NEGLIGENT COPS

The Legislative Council on Wednesday passed two amendment Bills. Both the bills were adopted by the Assembly on 16 March. The Karnataka Municipalities and Certain Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 aims at regulating outdoor advertisements and enabling municipal bodies to levy and collect fees on hoardings and billboards. The Karnataka Police (Amendment) Bill, 2026 empowers the Police Establishment Board (PEB) seels to transfer police officers up to the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police (DySP) for misconduct, negligence, dereliction of duty, or "an act of moral turpitude".

High Command will decide by-poll candidates: CM

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Amid hectic lobbying, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday said the selection of candidates for the 9 April Assembly bypolls to Bagalkot and Davangere Assembly constituencies will be decided by the Congress High Command.

He said a team has already visited both constituencies and a final call will be taken after discussions with senior leaders, including Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar and Congress General Secretary and Karnataka in-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala.

"Surjewala is coming to Karnataka on Friday," Siddaramaiah said. —*PTI*

INTERNAL TUSSLE INTENSIFIES IN JD(S) MYSURU UNIT

MYSURU, 18 MARCH

Although the assembly elections in Karnataka is still about two years away, internal tussle in Janata Dal (Secular) Mysuru district unit has intensified over the claims and counter claims about ticket allocation.

The latest tussle to surface was between disgruntled senior party functionary GT Devegowda, a former minister and Chamundeshwari MLA, and party working president SR Mahesh.

GT Devegowda claimed that he would seek the party ticket again from Chamundeshwari constituency in the 2028 assembly polls. He said he would abide by the decision of the party workers in this regard.

Mahesh, however, said that top leader and Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy had already made it clear that the party would field a new candidate from the constituency.

Yet, GTD said that he still is in JD(S) and was also ready to contest on the same party ticket if it given a chance. He said he would not quit politics. He also flayed the party leadership for allegedly sideling him

Meanwhile, Mahesh charged GTD with anti-party activities and rubbing shoulders with the Congress. —*Salar News*

Student takes ambulance to SSLC exam

KOLAR GOLD FIELDS, 18 MARCH

In an example of grit amidst challenges, an ailing tenth standard student arrived in an ambulance to sit for the Senior School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) exam at St Joseph School in Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) on Wednesday.

Kusuma, a student of St Mary's High School in KGF, had met with an accident about seven months ago and underwent a major leg and hip surgery. After she developed some infections, she was rushed to Aster Hospital at Whitefield in Bengaluru.

Kusuma was confined to her bed. Doctors say she requires two more surgeries to get back on her feet.

As she could not attend her regular classes, her parents had sought permission from the school authorities to continue her studies at home. The teachers sent her the notes on her phone. She sent back her completed work to her teachers.

Students make last minute preperations before taking their SSLC exams on Wednesday —*MOHAMMED ASAD*

She then sought permission from the State Education Department to allow her to write the exams. Kusuma was accompanied by her mother Sudha to the examination centre, where she wrote the Kannada paper with the help of a department-provided scribe. —*Salar News*

Didn't approve 'Sarke Chunar': Nora Fatehi

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Bollywood actor and performer Nora Fatehi on Wednesday said that she had no role in the Hindi version of the song 'Sarke Chunar Teri Sarke' from the film 'KD: The Devil'.

"They didn't take any approvals; they didn't take any permission from me," she said.

In the video shared by the Bollywood actor, Nora said she had shot the song a few years ago and had agreed to it because it was part of a big project and also featured veteran actor Sanjay Dutt.

She alleged that when the makers explained the translation of the song to her, nothing seemed "inappropriate" or "vulgar." . She also claimed that AI-generated image of her and Dutt was used for Kannada lyrical version.

Multiple complaints have been lodged about the song.

Produced by Venkat K Narayana under KVN Productions and presented by the same banner, 'KD: The Devil' is a period action entertainer inspired by real events from 1970s Bengaluru.

The movie features Dhruva Sarja in the titular role alongside Sanjay Dutt, Shilpa Shetty Kundra, Ramesh Aravind, and Reeshma Nanaiah and is scheduled to released on 30 April. —*ANI*

CONSTRUCTION TRAGEDY

4 workers hospitalised after toxic exposure

HUBBALLI, 18 MARCH

Four construction workers were admitted in critical condition to KMC-RI Hospital after being found unconscious with severe breathing difficulties inside a room at an under-construction building in Hubballi's Deshpande Nagar on Wednesday.

The affected were identified as Jar, Amjad Pasha, Jabi and Haider Ali, who are residents of Magadi in Bengaluru.

According to the police, the incident occurred on Monday night when the workers, who had arrived in Hubballi 10 days ago for work, allegedly slept inside a room after finishing their work.

Initial findings suggest the room, used for plywood and other chemical-based work, had poor ventilation due to closed shutters, possibly leading to a buildup of toxic gases that caused respiratory distress and unconsciousness.

The four were discovered on Tuesday morning by a co-worker who had allegedly slept elsewhere.

The condition of the four workers is reported to be serious, and they are undergoing treatment in the intensive care unit (ICU).

Dr Eshwar Hasabi, Medical Superintendent of KMC-RI Hospital, said the workers are being treated with oxygen support. "As they were sleeping in a small, closed room, there is a possibility of carbon monoxide toxicity or exposure to harmful fumes. Treatment is being given for both possibilities," he added. —*Salar News*

‘TVK offered 90 seats, CM post for Vijay’

Reports suggest that the offer was made by BJP as TVK says ‘won’t bow to Delhi’

CHENNAI, 18 MARCH

TVK leader Aadhav Arjuna has claimed that party Chief Vijay was offered the Chief Minister’s post and up to 50 per cent of Assembly seats by an unidentified party ahead of next month’s Tamil Nadu election, but declined the proposal.

Addressing a party meeting in Kolathur, Arjuna said the offer included a 50:50 seat-sharing arrangement and even a rotational Chief Ministership for two-and-a-half years. “They gave us all kinds of offers - from 50 to 90 seats. Vijay is not a person who will succumb to Delhi for the sake of the Chief Minister’s post. He only wants the trust of the people,” he said.

Though Arjuna did not name the party, his remarks have triggered speculation about BJP.

However, both the BJP and its ally AIADMK denied any such talks. AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami said his party was not in discussions with TVK, a stance endorsed by BJP state chief Nainar Nagenthran.

Sources, however, suggest the BJP explored a broader alliance to counter the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, led by Chief Minister M K Stalin, which is aligned with the Congress.

The BJP is believed to be seeking to consolidate anti-DMK votes, even attempting to bridge factions within the AIADMK — a strategy that has seen mixed results.

Vijay has publicly ruled out alliances, calling the BJP his “ideological enemy” and the DMK his “political enemy”. The AIADMK, meanwhile, is seen as wary of conceding space to the actor-turned-politician.

The TVK will make its electoral debut in the 23 April Assembly polls and plans to contest all 234 constituencies. Arjuna said the party aims to form a “secular, social justice government”, appealing to a broad voter base as Vijay positions himself within the political legacy of leaders such as CN Annadurai and MG Ramachandran. —*PTI*

TVK leader Aadhav Arjuna and party’s head and chief ministerial candidate Vijay brace for a showdown in the upcoming assembly polls in TN —*PTI*

- Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami said his party was not in discussions with TVK, a stance endorsed by BJP state chief Nainar. TVK will make its electoral debut on 23 April

TVK LEADER APOLOGISES FOR BELITTLING ACTOR RAJINI

TVK General Secretary Aadhav Arjuna said he did not intend to belittle "superstar" Rajinikanth for his previous comments regarding the actor's political entry.

Following a backlash, Arjuna apologised while addressing a TVK meet on Tuesday night.

"I didn't mean to belittle Rajinikanth, who is a leader to my own leader [Vijay]; I only meant it was a DMK conspiracy," Arjuna told a Kolathur party meeting. Acknowledging his youth, Arjuna noted that early surveys showed Rajinikanth commanding an 18 per cent vote share immediately after entering politics.

Arjuna alleged the DMK threatened Rajinikanth to block his political entry, unlike TVK founder Vijay, who had the "courage" to withstand such pressure. On Tuesday, Rajinikanth dismissed the accusation as "untrue."

Arjuna’s remark faced backlash from the actor’s fans, AIADMK Chief Edappadi Palaniswami, Union Minister L Murugan, State Minister S Regupathy, BJP state chief Nainar Nagendran and Rajinikanth's former advisor Ra Arjunamurthy. —PTI

DMK ALLOTS FIVE SEATS TO CPI

Following talks held at DMK party headquarters, it was decided that the Communist Party of India (CPI) would contest five Assembly seats for the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly polls, the ruling DMK said on Wednesday. CPI State Secretary M Veerapandiyan stated that the DMK requested the CPI to contest fewer seats to accommodate new alliance partners.

"The primary objective of the CPI in this election is to defeat the BJP and its alliance," Veerapandiyan added. In the 2021 election, CPI contested six seats and won two. The state assembly election is scheduled to be held on 23 April. —PTI

EPS, Udhayakumar behind AIADMK’s decline: OPS

CHENNAI, 18 MARCH

Former Chief Minister O Panneerselvam, who recently joined the DMK, blamed AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami and senior leader RB Udhayakumar, the Opposition party's dismal performance in the 2024 general elections. Panneerselvam recalled that despite his reluctance to contest in the Parliamentary elections from Ramanathapuram in 2024, he was pressured into the race by Udhayakumar and others.

"They appointed six candidates with the same name, Panneer Selvam in six constituencies....," he said. Distinguishing between mass leaders like former CM CN Annadurai, AIADMK founder MG Ramachandran, and DMK patriarch M Karunanidhi and those appointed by the organisation, Panneerselvam said he was appointed as chief minister. —*PTI*

Expelled TMC leader Humayun’s party to fight 182 seats in WB

KOLKATA, 18 MARCH

Former TMC leader Humayun Kabir on Wednesday announced the first list of 15 candidates of his newly formed Am Janata Unnayan Party, declaring it will contest 182 seats in the West Bengal Assembly polls.

Kabir said the party would field a Muslim candidate, Poonam Begum, against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the high-profile Bhabanipur constituency, where she is set to face BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari. Observers say the move may aim to dent the TMC’s minority vote base.

Kabir, who was expelled from the Trinamool Congress last year, also indicated coordination with All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen for a few seats. He will contest from Rejinagar and Naoda in Murshidabad.

Among candidates announced are Bapan Ghosh, Yasin Haidar and Syed Ahmed Kabir, along with nominees across Malda and Murshidabad. Kabir’s outfit is seeking to emerge as an alternative force in minority-dominated districts, though its impact may hinge on splitting votes.

I think that by pitting Suvendu Adhikari against Mamata Banerjee in Bhabanipur, we have managed to trap the TMC supremo in one corner. She will now have to focus on the seat to ensure her win there

Dilip Ghosh, Senior BJP leader

EC RESHUFFLES IAS OFFICERS AHEAD OF POLLS

The Election Commission of India reshuffled 13 IAS officers, appointing them as district magistrates-cum-district election officers (DEOs) across key districts including Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda and Murshidabad.

Officials said the officers will play a crucial role in ensuring free and fair polls, with immediate effect orders and compliance due by 19 March.

TMC MLA QUITS DISTRICT POST IN PROTEST

Signs of dissent surfaced in TMC after Rajganj MLA Khageswar Roy resigned from Jalpaiguri district post after being denied ticket. —*PTI*

Cong MP Pradyut Bordoloi joins BJP

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

In yet another jolt to the Congress ahead of the Assam Assembly polls, its senior leader and Lok Sabha MP Pradyut Bordoloi joined the BJP on Wednesday.

A Congress member for over five decades and the chairman of the manifesto committee for the Assembly polls, Bordoloi claimed that he resigned on Tuesday as he was facing humiliation and was sidelined after he supported Shashi Tharoor's candidature for the party president's post.

A two-term MP from Nagaon and a former four-time MLA, Bordoloi was inducted into the BJP in the presence of Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and other party leaders in Delhi.

The Congress termed his decision as "unfortunate", while the BJP claimed it reflected the Opposition party's weakening base, with Sarma saying that "no self-respecting individual" can remain in the Congress.

BJP National president Nitin Nabin approved sitting Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi's joining on Tuesday.

Sarma said that the state party leadership will recommend a ticket for Bordoloi for the Assembly polls.

Bordoloi, who is also a former Assam cabinet minister, had sent his resignation letter to AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday evening.

State Congress chief Gaurav Gogoi and AICC general secretary in-charge of Assam Jitendra Singh failed to convince Bordoloi to reverse his decision.

Bordoloi’s son Prateek is a Congress nominee from Margherita. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Chairperson Screening Committee said that differences over ticket allocation may have led to the decision. —*PTI*

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and BJP Assam President Dilip Saikia welcome Pradyut Bordoloi (centre) into the BJP in New Delhi —*PTI*

Can ED be remediless? SC on Mamata obstructing I-PAC raids

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court on Wednesday questioned the West Bengal government's objection to the maintainability of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) plea over alleged obstruction by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during a raid.

The court said no entity can be left remediless under the Constitution.

The West Bengal government has questioned the maintainability of the ED's plea alleging obstruction by Banerjee and other state authorities during its search of the office of political consultancy firm I-PAC in Kolkata in connection with a money-laundering probe.

The West Bengal government said that the ED is not a juristic person, enabling it to file an Article-32 petition in the apex court for violation of fundamental rights against a state.

The court further wondered what remedy does the ED have in a situation like this and what would happen in a similar scenario in the future.

The state government’s counsel said the ED is only a central government body and only the Union of India can file a writ petition. The ED has sought FIR against Banerjee and police officials. —*PTI*

Tenure of Parl panel on simultaneous polls extended

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

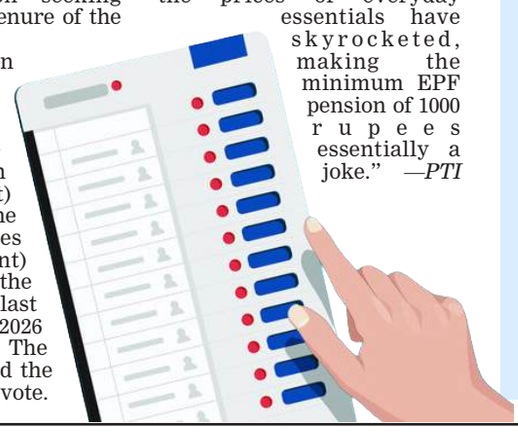
The Lok Sabha on Wednesday extended the tenure of the parliamentary committee examining Bills that seek to introduce simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies till the Monsoon session.

P P Chaudhary, chairmain of the Joint Committee of Parliament examining the Bills seeking to introduce simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, moved a motion seeking extension of the tenure of the panel.

He sought an extension of the tenure of the Joint Committee on the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, up to the first day of the last week of the 2026 monsoon session. The Lok Sabha adopted the motion by a voice vote.

‘RS 1,000 EPF A JOKE’

The Congress attacked the government after a Parliamentary panel recommended an urgent review of the Rs 1,000 minimum monthly pension under the Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995. Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said, " In the current era, when inflation has reached extreme levels due to the government's poor policies, healthcare costs and the prices of everyday essentials have skyrocketed, making the minimum EPF pension of 1000 rupees essentially a joke.” —*PTI*



For first time, IUML fields two women in Kerala

KOZHIKODE, 18 MARCH

In a first, the IUML is fielding two women candidates simultaneously in the Kerala Assembly elections to be held on 9 April.

Earlier, the IUML had given a seat to each woman in the 1996 and 2021 Assembly elections.

IUML, a key constituent of UDF, announced its list of 25 candidates, including several sitting MLAs and also some new names for the Assembly elections.

Fathima Thahiliya, a Youth League leader, has been fielded in Perambra in Kozhikode, while Jayanthi Rajan, a non-Muslim woman, will contest from Koothuparamba in Kannur.

However, the Women League, the party's women's wing, has expressed dissatisfaction over the selection of the candidates.

IUML General Secretary PMA Salam said the candidates list, giving prominence to freshers and youths, has proved that all the allegations and campaigns being raised against the party are wrong.

He said IUML is ultimately a secular party giving equal consideration to all sections of people.

He also said the party leadership has tried to give freshers and youths maximum consideration in the candidates list.

Fathima Thahiliya, who began her campaign in Perambra, said pro-UDF wave would help her win the seat. —*PTI*

Search ops on after suspicious movement in J&K

JAMMU, 18 MARCH

Security forces have launched search operations following reports of suspected terrorist movement in Jammu and Kashmir Rajouri, Doda and Poonch districts, officials said on Wednesday. Security officials launched a combing operation in Khandli and adjoining areas near Palma in Rajouri on Tuesday. The search began after a “suspicious individual” was spotted moving toward a nearby forest; however, no contact has been established with the individual. Joint operations are also underway in the Sarlea and Marmat areas of Doda, as well as Dandi Dhara and Ari Sarooti in Poonch district. Marmat is used by terrorists to move between Doda and Basantgarh in Udhampur, touching parts of the Ramban district. —*PTI*

Cong MP writes to Shah on 'threats' to Muslims in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Congress MP Mohammad Jawed, along with some other opposition party MPs, wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday over threats to Muslims in Uttam Nagar. They urged Shah to direct the Delhi Police to act firmly against “open threats” to the Muslim community. Jawed’s letter follows a Sunday protest in West Delhi’s Uttam Nagar, where right-wing Hindu groups demanded strict action for the 4 March killing of Tarun, 26. Tarun was killed in JJ Colony during a Holi clash sparked by a child throwing a water balloon at a neighbour. According to reports protesters torched two vehicles belonging to accused family during the demonstration. —*PTI*

‘Ruling party in M’rashtra backing teak smugglers’

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

The Opposition claimed in the Maharashtra assembly on Wednesday that teak wood smugglers operating in Chandrapur district are enjoying political patronage. Congress legislature party leader Vijay Wadettiwar alleged during Question Hour that forest officials in the Brahmapuri area are being threatened and pressured by local leaders to spare smugglers from action. Wadettiwar said a forest official recently seized two tractors loaded with teak wood, which is widely used in furniture for its durability. However, a local politician barged into the forest office, abused officials and forced them to release both the vehicles and the accused, he claimed. Forest Minister G Naik said an inquiry would be conducted. —*PTI*

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

‘Rly staff may travel for free on Palace on Wheels’

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Railway officials may travel with their families on Indian Railways trains only as per prescribed norms, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told the Lok Sabha in a written reply on Wednesday. He was responding to a query on the justification for complimentary travel for officials and their spouses on luxury trains such as the Palace on Wheels and the Maharaja Express. Tamil Nadu MP V S Matheswaran sought details of officials granted such travel since 2012 and questioned the rationale for allowing spouses on official trips at public expense. Fares on these trains range from Rs 4 lakh to Rs 22 lakh per person, depending on class and tour category. —*PTI*

RETIRED, NOT OUT

No full stop in politics: PM bids farewell to 59 RS MPs

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday lauded 59 members retiring from the Rajya Sabha between April and July, calling Parliament an “open university” and urging them to remain active in public life.

Addressing the biennial farewell, Modi said such occasions rise above partisan divides and foster shared sentiment. “In politics, there is no full stop. The future awaits you,” he said, assuring members their experience would continue to shape national life.

He paid tribute to outgoing Deputy Chairman Harivansh, describing him as “gentle” yet “a man of rigorous action”, noting his outreach to youth even during recess.

In a lighter vein, Modi praised Ramdas Athawale, remarking that humour in the House has declined in the era of constant media scrutiny, but Athawale remains “evergreen”.

On Parliament’s bicameral system, Modi likened legislative scrutiny between the two Houses to seeking a “second opinion”, strengthening democratic decisions. He also noted some members had served in both old and new Parliament buildings and described a six-year term as transformative.

Chairman Radhakrishnan said 59 members from 20 states, including nine women, will retire. Among those demitting office are Priyanka Chaturvedi. —*PTI*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in the Rajya Sabha during the second part of the Budget session of Parliament, in New Delhi —*PTI*

Officer takes bribe for funds to repair school toilet, held

BARWANI, 18 MARCH

The Lokayukta police caught Block Resource Coordinator Mahendra Singh Rathore red-handed on Wednesday in Madhya Pradesh's Barwani district while allegedly accepting a Rs 5,000 bribe. Rathore was apprehended in front of an ATM for demanding the bribe in exchange for releasing funds to repair a school's girls' toilet. Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Sunil Kumar Talan said Rs 20,000 was approved to repair a girls' school toilet, but wasn't released due to "technical issues". When a completion certificate was needed to access the funds, Rathore and sub-engineer Ashwin Dagar allegedly demanded a bribe. A case has been registered against both government officials; the accused have not yet been arrested.—*PTI*

Tribal girl sold for marriage; Spouse, 3 more held

THANE, 18 MARCH

Police in Maharashtra's Thane district arrested a man and three accomplices on Wednesday for allegedly abducting, illegally marrying, and sexually assaulting a 15-year-old tribal girl. "The victim was exploited due to her extreme poverty and the absence of her parents. She was allegedly abducted on 26 February by a broker who promised her a better life but instead sold her to an older man," Thane police said. Her "husband", Bhausaheb Tambe, allegedly kept her locked in a farm shed and raped her. Following a probe, the police apprehended Tambe and three others under the POCSO Act, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the Prevention of Child Marriage Act and BNS.—*PTI*

—*ANI*

Sheena Bora murder: SC extends trial by 9 months

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court has granted a final nine-month extension to complete the Sheena Bora murder trial, explicitly stating that no further delays will be entertained. The top court also granted liberty to Indrani Mukerjea, Sheena Bora's mother and the prime accused in the case, to file an application seeking to travel abroad. Media baron Peter Mukerjea, Indrani's ex-husband, is also a co-accused in the case. In April 2012, Indrani Mukerjea, Sanjeev Khanna, and driver-turned-approver Shyamvar Rai allegedly strangled Sheena Bora, 24, later burning and disposing of her body in a Raigad forest. Indrani and Khanna were arrested in August 2015, while Peter was arrested later. All the accused out on bail.—*PTI*

Gujarat Assembly gets bomb threat during session

GANDHINAGAR, 18 MARCH

The Gujarat assembly complex received a bomb threat via email on Wednesday during the ongoing Budget session, but it turned out to be a hoax. The threat was received on the official email ID of the Assembly just minutes before the House proceedings were scheduled to begin. The email claimed a bomb had been planted in the assembly complex, following which all staff and MLAs were asked to vacate the premises, deputy superintendent of police Piyush Vanda said. All the MLAs left the premises. A bomb detection and disposal squad checked the premises thoroughly, but nothing suspicious was found. The House proceedings began after an hour's delay.. Legislators urged the government to take strict action against those involved.—*PTI*

8 killed after EV charging point explodes in MP

LPG cylinder inside the house explodes worsening the blaze

INDORE, 18 MARCH

Eight members of a family were killed when a fire broke out in a three-storey house after an explosion at an electric vehicle charging point outside the building in Madhya Pradesh's Indore on Wednesday.

The deceased included two minor children and three women.

The Madhya Pradesh government announced a detailed investigation into it by a committee of experts and the framing of a standard operating procedure (SOP) for EV charging.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the incident and announced an ex gratia of Rs 2 lakh for the kin of each deceased and Rs 50,000 to the injured persons.

The fire broke out in the house at Brajeshwari Annex Colony between 3.30am and 4.30am.

A car was being charged outside the three-storey house.

A person watches as a rescue operation is underway after a fire broke out in a house in Indore in Madhya Pradesh on Wednesday—*PTI*

"There was an explosion at the charging point, and the fire in the car then engulfed the house," police commissioner Santosh Kumar Singh said.

The house doors were fitted with electronic locks, making it difficult for the police to break in. Cooking gas cylinders inside the house also exploded, further intensifying the blaze.

Three persons trapped inside the house were rescued.

The bodies of eight persons killed in the fire were brought to a government hospital for autopsy.

The deceased have been identified as Tanmay, 6, Rashi Sethia, 12, Simran, 30, Tinu, 35, Suman Sethia, 60, Vijay Sethia, 65, Chhotu Sethia, 22 and Manoj, 65.

State Urban Development and Housing Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya, who visited the scene expressed concern over large buildings being constructed on small plots of land in the area, and the narrowing of the road for ambulances and other vehicles due to cars parked on both sides of the main road. "I will discuss with office-bearers of the area's resident associations to resolve these problems," he added.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said the incident was extremely heartbreaking. —*PTI*

9 of family killed in massive fire in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Nine members of a family, including three children were killed after a massive fire tore through a multi-storey residential building in Delhi's Palam area on Wednesday morning.

Three others were injured, two of them jumped from the building at Ram Chowk Market in a desperate attempt to escape the flames.

The building housed a cloth and cosmetic showroom in the basement, ground and first floors, while its owner, Rajender Kashyap, lived on the second and third floors with his family.

Neighbours said the fire initially started on the first floor but spread quickly, possibly due to the presence of inflammable perfumes and other beauty products in the shop.

Kashyap lived in the building with his wife, their five sons, a daughter, four daughters-in-law and seven grandchildren.

Kashyap's wife wife Lado, sons Pravesh and Kamal, Kamal's wife Ashu and their three minor daughters, Lado's daughter, Himanshi and daughter-in-law, Deepika died in the fire.

Thick plumes of black smoke billowing out of the building as firefighters battled the blaze in the congested market area.

The exact cause of the fire is yet to be ascertained. —*PTI*

A family member grieving the death of nine relatives who were killed in a fire, being consoled by volunteers in Dwarka in New Delhi —*PTI*

Chhattisgarh surgeon gets 2-yr jail in 12 sterilisation deaths

BILASPUR, 18 MARCH

A court in Chhattisgarh's Bilaspur has sentenced a surgeon to two years in jail in connection with the deaths of 12 women following sterilisation surgeries conducted by him in 2014.

The court on Tuesday convicted surgeon RK Gupta under the charge of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. A fine of Rs 25,000 for each of the 12 deaths.

The court also sentenced Gupta under other charges, awarding six months' imprisonment with a fine of Rs 500 under one section, and one month's jail with a fine of Rs 100 under another.

The case relates to a sterilisation camp held in November, 2014, at a private hospital in Pendari near Sakri village in Bilaspur. A total of 83 women from nearby rural areas were brought to the camp for sterilisation procedures.

According to the prosecution, Gupta, who was then a senior surgeon at the district hospital, conducted all the surgeries within a span of about three hours. Soon after the operations, the women fell ill and were admitted to different hospitals, where 12 of them died.

Family members mourn the death of the 12 woman due to sterilisation soon after the incident in Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh—*PTI*

The prosecution said the deaths were linked to alleged negligence during surgeries leading to septicaemia and contaminated post-operative medication.

Following an investigation, the police had filed a chargesheet against Gupta and five individuals associated with two drug supply firms - Ramesh and Sumit Mahavar of Mahavar Pharma firm, and Rakesh, Rajesh and Manish Khare of Kavita Pharmaceuticals. However, the court acquitted all five accused due to lack of evidence. The court granted him bail in the case as his sentence is less than three years. —*PTI*

Nirav seeks to reopen UK extradition case

LONDON, 18 MARCH

The hearing on fugitive **diamond merchant Nirav Modi's** application seeking permission to reopen his extradition appeal has concluded in the High Court in London, with claims that he faces a "real risk of torture" during interrogations by the investigating agencies in India.

Extradition poses a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment or torture arising from interrogation in India, argued Nirav's barrister Edward Fitzgerald KC.

Lord Jeremy Stuart-Smith and Justice Robert Jay, presiding over the appeal at the Royal Courts of Justice, reserved their judgment at the end of a day-long hearing on Tuesday.

"This case is of extreme importance, to Mr Modi and to the Indian officials who have travelled from India. We will deliver the judgment as soon as possible," said Stuart-Smith.

The 54-year-old businessman is wanted in India to stand trial on charges of fraud and money laundering in the estimated USD 2 billion Punjab National Bank (PNB) loan scam case.

His lawyers relied heavily on the extradition case of Sanjay Bhandari to seek discharged from extradition bail.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), representing the Indian government in court, argued against the grounds for reopening the extradition of the Nirav, which was ordered nearly six years ago.

If permission to appeal is denied by court, the decks are expected to be cleared for Nirav Modi's extradition to be held atArthur Jail ahead of trial in India. —*PTI*

Meghalaya lifts internet ban in Garo Hills

SHILLONG, 18 MARCH

The Meghalaya government on Wednesday withdrew the suspension of internet services from all five districts of the violence-hit Garo Hills region after reviewing the law and order situation there, officials said.

The suspension was imposed as a precautionary measure following incidents of violence that led to the deaths of two persons and unrest in parts of the region, particularly in Tura, where clashes, vandalism and damage to property were reported.

Protests erupted over the issue of a GHADC notification barring non-tribals from participating in the tribal council elections, the officials said.

An order issued by the Home (Political) Department said the earlier notification which had suspended mobile data and internet services in West Garo, East Garo, South Garo, North Garo and South West Garo hills districts, has been revoked with immediate effect. The decision to lift the ban was taken after reviewing the prevailing situation. —*PTI*

Pahalgam attack victim's daughter gets govt job

PUNE, 18 MARCH

Asawari Jagdale, the daughter of a Pahalgam terror attack victim, on Wednesday received an appointment letter for a job as an officer in the Pune Municipal Corporation.

She has been appointed as an administrative officer at the civic body, a Class 2 post.

Asawari's father, Santosh Jagdale, a resident of Pune, was one of the 26 victims who died when terrorists opened fire in Pahalgam's Baisaran meadows on 22 April last year.

Following the massacre, the state government had announced Rs 50 lakh in financial aid to the families of the six victims from Maharashtra and government employment to their next of kin.

However, Asawari had last month vented her frustration on not getting an assured government job. She had said the family has been facing financial hardship since her father's death, and their savings have depleted.

Soon after she voiced her concern in the media, Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde had directed PMC commissioner Naval Kishore Ram to induct her into government service.

Asawari received her job appointment letter from the PMC commissioner on Wednesday.

Several BJP leaders and office-bearers were present with her at the civic headquarters. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis also congratulated her. —*PTI*

No relief for Mumbai mayor in assault case

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

A Mumbai court has refused to discharge city **Mayor and BJP corporator Ritu Tawde** in a 2016 case of assault on two school teachers, citing the statements of the victims as enough "frame charges" against her.

The other witnesses also stated that Tawde had assaulted the teachers, the court noted on

Tuesday.

The incident took place on 29 July 29, 2016 at an Urdu medium school of the city civic body in the Vakola area.

The prosecution said the conflict erupted over the "sudden transfer" of a lady teacher battling cancer. Tawde, along with six others, allegedly entered the school and engaged in a heated exchange with the management over the teacher's transfer. An FIR was after 13 days of the incident. Tawde claimed her presence at the spot was "coincidental and unrelated to the alleged mob incident". Her status as a BJP corporator appears to have been misused by the "complainant (school headmistress) to gain undue publicity".The police however, contended that the victims' statement clearly revealed Tawde had slapped the two teachers. —*PTI*

Kathua rape-murder: HC denies relief to accused

CHANDIGARH, 18 MARCH

The Punjab and Haryana High Court dismissed the plea of mastermind of the 2018 rape and murder of an eight-year-old in Kathua Sanji Ram, seeking suspension of a life term.

The accused does not deserve the "concession of suspension of sentence at this stage", the Punjab and Haryana High Court has said.

Ram, who was caretaker of the 'devasthanam' (temple) where the crime took place in January 2018, was sentenced to life by a sessions court in Pathankot. His nephew Parvesh Kumar and special police officer Deepak Khajuria were also given life terms.

The court, however, directed the registry to list Ram's main appeal against conviction for final hearing in September as he has already spent a substantial period in custody.

The nomadic girl was abducted on 10 January that year and raped in captivity in the small village temple in Jammu's Kathua region that was exclusively manned by Ram. She was kept sedated and later bludgeoned to death. —*PTI*

M'rashtra to set up task force on child digital safety

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Maharashtra's efforts to promote safety amid children's growing, often unregulated use of the internet and social media are proving inadequate, prompting the state IT department to set up an expert task force to study the issue, Minister Ashish Shelar said Wednesday.

Once the task force submits its report, the government will decide on measures to enhance child safety, strengthen education, promote digital empowerment, and encourage responsible use of technology, IT Minister Shelar stated in the legislative council.

Surveys indicate a significant rise in the use of mobile phones, the internet and social media among children below 16 years of age in the state, he said in a written response to a question by Independent MLC Satyajeet Tambe.

There are growing demands from various quarters, including parents' associations and social groups, to frame regulations to restrict or control such use. —*PTI*

FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY & DIGNITY

Andhra offers free bus travel to specially-abled persons

AMARAVATI, 18 MARCH

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Wednesday launched the 'Divyang Shakti' scheme, here, which offers free bus travel to people with disabilities.

Billed as a special gift for the Ugadi festival, 'Divyang Shakti' is focused on social equity, mobility and "last-mile dignity".

Naidu launched the scheme in the greenfield capital city of Amaravati.

In a symbolic gesture aimed at amplifying its outreach, the Chief Minister, along with senior leaders travelled with the beneficiaries on Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport

Corporation (APSRTC) buses post-launch.

Naidu travelled with the beneficiaries from Mangalagiri bus station to Penumaka village, about 11 km, said an official press release.

The scheme is expected to benefit over 12.76 lakh individuals, including 11.16 lakh persons with disabilities and their attendants, making it one of the largest state-led mobility support programmes for the differently-abled in India, the government said.

Key features of the scheme include free bus travel for people with disabilities across APSRTC services, 50 percent fare concession for attendants accompanying beneficiaries and eligibility for individuals with over 40 percent disability.

The scheme will cover 21 categories of disabilities while the government will spend Rs 207 crore on its implementation through the APSRTC.

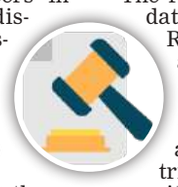
MLAs launched the scheme in their constituencies. —*PTI*

VACANCY, BACKLOG OF 5L CASES CRIPPLE CONSUMER COURTS: REPORT

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Massive vacancy and mounting case backlog of more than five lakh are undermining the effectiveness of the consumer grievance redressal system in the country, a report said.

More than half the posts of presidents and members in the state consumer disputes redressal commissions (SCDRC) remain vacant, the Consumer Justice Report prepared by the India Justice Report (IJR) said.



Between 2020 and 2024, the pendency of cases increased by 21 per cent, from 87,545 to 5.15 lakh.

In Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand, more than two in three cases (70 to 80 per cent) were pending for over three years.

Former Supreme Court judge Justice SK Kaul said these are eroding the confidence of consumers in the redressal mechanism.

Consumers are mostly hassled and aggrieved about the deficiency in service, especially in insurance, housing and banking sectors.

The report, based on public data obtained through Right to Information and parliamentary replies, found that as of 2025, about half of the state commissions and one-third of the district commissions lacked a sitting president, while nearly 40 per cent of the member posts were vacant.

Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Arunachal Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh – had over 60 per cent vacancy among member positions. —*PTI*

Gulf Keralites uncertain over 'vote flights' amid war

As the 9 April Kerala Assembly polls approach, anxiety is growing among Gulf-based Keralite voters who are unsure if they will be able to return home to cast their votes this time.

The concern is driven mainly by the ongoing tensions in West Asia involving Iran and Israel–US allies, which have severely disrupted air travel.

Thousands of flights have been cancelled or delayed, and several countries have partially or fully closed their airspace, affecting major Gulf aviation hubs like Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha.

With limited flight services, frequent cancellations and rising ticket prices, expatriate voters fear that the usual "vote flight" arrangements may not be feasible this time.

For years, organisations like the Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre (KMCC), the overseas wing of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), have played a key role in helping expatriates participate in elections.

During the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, hundreds of Keralites working in Gulf countries managed to return home, many of them on specially arranged "vote flights."

From Saudi Arabia and other regions, nearly half a dozen such flights were organised, bringing in voters who often stayed back only for a day or two before flying back to work.

This time, however, the situation looks more complicated.

IUML leader Sayyid Munavvar Ali Shihab Thangal expressed concern over whether these special arrangements will be possible.

While efforts are still on, he pointed out that the evolving crisis in West Asia is creating uncertainty.

"There is hope that things will stabilise in the coming days, but for now, the situation remains unclear," Thangal told PTI.

In the UAE, where a large number of Kerala voters are based, the issue is not just about flight availability but also cost.

KMCC UAE national committee general secretary Anwar Naha said that though flights are operating, ticket prices have gone up sharply.

Plans are being made to arrange chartered flights in early April, but even then, only a small number of people are likely to benefit.

"Most people come only for a very short visit, sometimes just for two days, mainly because they cannot get leave," he said.

With lakhs of eligible voters in the UAE alone, only a fraction can actually make the trip.

"While some manage by booking tickets on their own, many are left out due to high costs and work commitments," Naha told PTI.

A similar situation exists in Saudi Arabia.

KMCC Saudi national committee general secretary Ashraf Vengad highlighted that travel routes through major airports like Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam are under pressure due to the regional tensions.

Though travel agents are being approached to arrange chartered services, the high fares and uncertainty mean that only a limited number of voters may be able to travel.

Behind these logistical challenges lies a larger issue that has been raised for years -- the lack of a proper system for expatriate voting.

Naha said a majority of overseas Indians, despite being eligible voters, are unable to participate in elections simply because they cannot travel home.

Many point out that several countries allow their citizens abroad to vote from where they are, and feel India should consider a similar system.

For now, Keralites in Gulf, who wish to vote, are left hoping that flights will become more accessible & affordable in the coming weeks. *—PTI*

Thousands of flights are cancelled or delayed as several countries shut airspace, affecting major Gulf aviation hubs *—WIKICOMMONS*

Israeli authorities hang Israeli and US flags at the site struck by an Iranian missile that killed two people, in Ramat Gan, Israel *—PTI*

BENGALURU IN

FESTIVE MODE

Bengaluru markets are bustling with people buying pooja items, clothes, sweets and other items ahead of Ugadi and Eid ul-Fitr. Ugadi will be celebrated on 19 March, while Eid ul-Fitr falls on 20–21 March

— MOHAMMED ASAD

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Nandigram, Sandeshkhali & other WB seats likely to see intense battle

With the assembly polls now announced, West Bengal is officially on track to chart the course of its government for the next five years.

Following is a look at some of the key constituencies in the districts, which could go a long way in determining the colour of the state's political landscape.

NANDIGRAM

Nandigram in Purba Medinipur district occupies a special place in Bengal's political history as the epicentre of the anti–land acquisition movement in 2007 during the Left Front regime. The protests against a proposed chemical hub became a turning point that weakened the Left's three-decade rule and propelled Mamata Banerjee's rise to power.

The constituency again grabbed national attention in the 2021 assembly elections when senior BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari defeated Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in a high-stakes contest, turning it into one of the most politically symbolic seats in the state.

SANDESHKHALI

When Rekha Patra, a housewife from Sandeshkhali in Bengal's Sunderbans delta and an alleged torture victim in the hands of arrested TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh, was fielded as the BJP's face in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections from the Basirhat seat, she was labelled as the "embodiment of the party's fight against atrocities on women under Mamata Banerjee's rule".

Patra lost the polls in Basirhat, a TMC fortress, by a margin of over 3.33 lakh votes, to TMC's Haji Nurul Islam, who is no more. The BJP, however, took heart from the fact that Patra managed to secure a lead over Islam in the Sandeshkhali assembly seat, one of the seven assembly constituencies that make up the Basirhat Lok Sabha constituency.

Two years hence, the Sandeshkhali violence issue may have been pushed to the back burner, but the saffron camp continues to keep the issue of women's safety at the forefront of its election agenda.

GAIGHATA

Located in North 24 Parganas district along the India–Bangladesh border, Gaighata is widely regarded as a stronghold of the Matua community, a significant Scheduled Caste group whose political preferences often influence electoral outcomes in several constituencies.

The Matua vote has become a key battleground between the BJP and the ruling TMC, especially in the context of debates around citizenship, refugee rights and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

ASANSOL DAKSHIN

Situated in the industrial belt of Paschim Bardhaman district, this seat represents the urban and coal-mining heartland of western Bengal. The constituency is currently represented by BJP's Agnimitra Paul since 2021.

With its mix of industrial workers, traders and urban middle-class voters, the seat often mirrors political shifts in the wider Asansol–Durgapur industrial region.

KHARAGPUR SADAR

It is another significant constituency, known for its diverse electorate comprising railway employees, traders and migrant workers. The seat in Paschim Medinipur district once served as the political base of former BJP state president Dilip Ghosh, who represented the constituency in the 2016 assembly elections before moving to parliamentary politics.

With the presence of major institutions such as IIT Kharagpur nearby, the constituency combines an academic hub with a bustling railway township.

SUJAPUR

Sujapur is likely to remain one of the most closely watched seats in the polls due to its strategic and demographic significance.

Located in Malda district, Sujapur has a mixed voter base with a substantial minority population. It is currently represented by TMC's Muhammad Abdul Ghani.

Sujapur's electoral behaviour often reflects broader political trends in North Bengal, and its outcome could influence the overall performance of parties in the region.

SAMSERGANJ

A nondescript assembly constituency in Murshidabad district till recently, Samsergunj caught people's attention following violent agitations in April 2025 against the Waqf (Amendment) Act.

The killing of a 72-year-old man and his son in a mob attack at their house led to massive protests by the BJP, who had accused the ruling TMC of being complicit and the police of not taking action.

Central forces were deployed on High Court orders to control the situation in the violence-hit district.

Samserganj is a Muslim-majority constituency where the Congress came second in the 2021 polls with 37 per cent votes against the TMC's 51 per cent.

The BJP, which came third with less than 6 per cent vote share, hopes to improve its tally riding on polarisation, observers say.

DINHATA

This constituency in North Bengal's Cooch Behar district has emerged as one of the most politically volatile segments of Bengal, marked by fierce electoral contests between the TMC and the BJP in recent years.

A largely rural constituency with around three lakh voters, the presence of nearly 41 per cent ST electorate makes social and agrarian issues key factors in the region's electoral politics.

Represented by Udayan Guha, a senior TMC leader doubling up as the North Bengal Development department minister, it remained a stronghold of Forward Bloc, a Left Front constituent, till 2011.

In the 2021 state polls, Union Minister Nisith Pramanik of the BJP narrowly defeated Guha, highlighting the party's growing influence in the region.

Guha staged a comeback that year after Pramanik vacated the seat to retain his position in the Lok Sabha. *—PTI*

- Patra lost the polls in Basirhat, a TMC fortress, by a margin of over 3.33 lakh votes, to TMC's Haji Nurul Islam, who is no more. The BJP, however, took heart from the fact that Patra managed to secure a lead over Islam in the Sandeshkhali assembly seat, one of the seven assembly constituencies that make up Basirhat Lok Sabha constituency.

—PTI

Pakistan Day scaled down amid oil crisis: PM

ISLAMABAD, 18 MARCH

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced on Tuesday that Pakistan will scale down its Pakistan Day celebrations due to the ongoing oil crisis. "In the backdrop of the ongoing Gulf oil crisis and the consequent austerity measures announced by the Government, it has been decided that the Pakistan Day Parade and associated ceremonial events shall not be held on 23rd March 2026", a statement said. It further noted that the Day would be marked with a simple flag-hoisting ceremony "at appropriate levels". Pakistan Day centers on a military parade commemorating the 1940 Lahore Resolution, which called for an independent Muslim state. However, with the government reeling from the West Asian oil crisis, Islamabad has implemented several austerity measures. —*ANI*

Meteor 'boom' causes panic in US states

CLEVELAND, 18 MARCH

A 7-ton meteor sped across the Cleveland sky at around 72,420 kilometres per hour on Tuesday before breaking apart in a thunderous boom. The American Meteor Society received reports of a bright fireball seen from Wisconsin to Maryland at 9 am. NASA later confirmed the meteor was nearly 6 feet in diameter. The meteor first appeared above Lake Erie, travelling over 55 kilometres through the upper atmosphere. According to NASA, it fragmented over Valley City, north of Medina, releasing energy equivalent to 250 tons of TNT and triggering a sonic boom. There have been no early reports of any debris being found. Meteors typically fall somewhere in the US about once a day. —*PTI*

1 dead and 1 hurt in shooting at New Mexico base

ALAMOGORDO, 18 MARCH

A shooting at a US Air Force base in New Mexico has left one dead and another wounded, according to military officials. The person who was wounded has is in medical treatment. Holloman Air Force Base near Alamogordo, New Mexico, was placed on lockdown at approximately 5.30 pm on Tuesday following reports of an active shooter, according to a base statement. "Emergency personnel are responding to the situation and there is no threat at this time," the statement said. Security officials have confirmed the base is safe and the lockdown has been lifted. Neither the names of the people shot nor any additional details on the shooting have been released. —*PTI*

Bondi to testify on DOJ's handling of Epstein files

WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

US Attorney General Pam Bondi was subpoenaed on Tuesday to answer questions in front of Congress regarding the Justice Department's (DOJ) handling of the millions of files related to the late convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. Bondi has been ordered to appear for a deposition on 14 April, following a vote from earlier this month that garnered support from five Republicans. "As Attorney General, you are directly responsible for overseeing the Department's collection, review, and determinations regarding the release of files pursuant to the Epstein Files Transparency Act, and the Committee therefore believes that you possess valuable insight into these efforts," the committee stated. Meanwhile, the department on Tuesday said the subpoena is "completely unnecessary." —*PTI*

Iran launched missiles create a streak across central Israel on Wednesday; (inset) Iranian Red Crescent Society rescue teams from Tehran and Ardabil to assist people injured in areas recently hit, following the escalation of hostilities in Iran —*PTI/IFRC*

Iran rains missiles to avenge deaths

Israel hits Iran gas fields; Tehran says energy is on the menu

DUBAI, 18 MARCH

- 10 people were killed by Israeli airstrikes in central Beirut, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry. Another two people were killed in an airstrike in Lebanon's western Bekaa valley.

After confirming that security chief Ali Larijani was killed by Israel, Iran launched a fresh salvo of missiles at Israel and Gulf countries, indicating that the war would not end despite the assassination of one its mot important leaders.

However, Israel then targeted an Iranian offshore natural gas field, prompting Tehran to ask Gulf countries to evacuate people around their energy facilities, moving the focus of the three-week long war to the lifeline of the region: energy.

Iran's armed forces warned it will take "decisive action" in response to attacks on its South Pars gas field, according to a statement carried on the IRGC-affiliated news agency Tasnim.

"We consider targeting the fuel, energy, and gas infrastructures of the countries of origin legitimate and will retaliate strongly at the earliest opportunity," the Iranian military said in a statement.

Iran attacked Saudi Arabia's vast Eastern Province, home to many of its oil fields, as well as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates on Wednesday.

WEST ASIA WAR DAY-19

US DEPLOYS BUNKER-BUSTER BOMBS

The US carried out strikes using "multiple 5,000-pound (2,267 kg) deep penetrator munitions" on Iran, targeting "hardened Iranian missile sites" along its coastline near the Strait of Hormuz, its Central Command said.

2 KILLED IN ISRAEL

Two people were killed in a ballistic missile attack in central Israel, according to Magen David Adom (MDA). Shrapnel from the missile also struck the city of Beni Brak, just north of Tel Aviv, lightly injuring one person, MDA said.

IRAQ SHIPS OIL

Iraq, which paused operations at its main oil terminal on the Persian Gulf last week, said Wednesday it had reached a deal with the autonomous northern Iraqi Kurdish administration to begin exporting 2,50,000 barrels of crude oil daily via a pipeline to the Mediterranean Ceyhan port in Turkey.

Saudi Arabia is also already bypassing the Strait of Hormuz by sending some of its oil by pipeline across the country to be shipped from a Red Sea port.

BLOOD IN BEIRUT

10 people were killed by Israeli airstrikes in central Beirut, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry. Another two people were killed in an airstrike in Lebanon's western Bekaa valley, it said.

Among those killed was a journalist.

Israeli strikes have displaced more than 1 million Lebanese — roughly 20 per cent of the population

Overall, 912 people have been killed in Lebanon, 17 killed in Israel, 1,500 in Iran, 17 US military officials and about a dozen people in the Gulf and Iraq. —*Agencies*

> **We do not believe in a ceasefire, we believe in ending the war. And ending the war means exactly that: ending the war on all fronts. Once and for all the issue of war is resolved, and that we witness peace throughout the region: in Lebanon, in Yemen, in Iraq, in Iran, and in other countries**
>
> —Abbas Araghchi, Iran Foreign Minister

> **If I didn't terminate Obama's horrible... Iran nuclear deal, you would have had a nuclear war four years ago. You would have had a nuclear holocaust. You would have had it again if we didn't bomb the site... It would take 10 years to rebuild the damage that's been done. But I think we have to make it a little bit more permanent**
>
> —Donald Trump, US President

> **The Strait of Hormuz situation won't return to its pre-war status**
>
> —Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Iranian Parliament Speaker

Iran executes 'Mossad spy'

Iran's judiciary said on Wednesday a man has been executed for allegedly spying for Israel's Mossad intelligence agency. The man, Kourosh Keyvani, allegedly "provided images and information on sensitive locations" to the Mossad, according to Mizan news agency.

90 ships crossed Hormuz, mostly Chinese shadow tankers

HONG KONG, 18 MARCH

About 90 ships, including oil tankers, have crossed the Strait of Hormuz since the outset of the war, Lloyd's List Intelligence said. Many of the ships that passed through were 'shadow tankers', likely associated with China.

Notably, Iran is still exporting millions of barrels of oil. As crude prices spiked above USD 100 a barrel, vessels with ties to India and Pakistan have also crossed the strait.

Of the 89 ships that crossed the Strait between 1 and 15 March, 16 were oil tankers, according to Lloyd's List, down from roughly 100 to 135 vessel per day before the war.

More than one-fifth of vessels were believed to be Iran-affiliated, while Chinese and Greek ships among the rest. Vessels may be transiting "with at least some level of diplomatic intervention," said Richard Meade, editor-in-chief of Lloyd's List. So, Iran may have "effectively created a safe corridor". —*Agencies*

Tulsi backs Iran war: Could rebuild military

WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

At a Senate Intelligence hearing on global threats, US Director of National Intelligence **Tulsi Gabbard** stated that Iran's nuclear enrichment programme was obliterated in strikes in June 2025, and that the US had seen no efforts by Tehran to rebuild it.

According to the annual global threat assessment report, Iran's military projection capabilities was "largely destroyed", Gabbard said, and Iran's strategic position "significantly degraded". But, the regime appears intact, and since internal protests have been violently suppressed with thousands killed, if it survives, Iran would probably "begin a years-long effort to rebuild its military".

She said Pakistan's long-range ballistic missile programme could potentially include an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capable of striking the US.

"The intelligence community (IC) assesses that Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan have been developing an array of nuclear missile systems that put our homeland within range," Gabbard said.

"While In 2025 alone, North Korea's cryptocurrency heist stole $2 billion, which the IC believes is helping to fund further development of its strategic weapons programs," Gabbard said.

Top Trump administration national security officials are facing congressional hearings on the Iran war.

The hearings, which began on Wednesday, are likely to delve into internal administration debate given the resignation of **Joe Kent** as director of the National Counterterrorism Centre. Kent resigned on Tuesday, saying Iran posed no imminent threat and that Israel had lobbied for the war. He said he could "in good conscience" back the war.

FBI head Kash Patel is likely to be grilled about whether the US is prepared for terrorism threats. Defence Intelligence head Lt Gen James H Adams is expected to speak on the US allegedly using failed intelligence on an school in Iran that killed 165 girls.

— *PTI / ANI*

US asks Syria to send forces to Lebanon

An explosion from a building following an Israeli strike in central Beirut, Lebanon on Wednesday —*x*

DAMASCUS/ WASHINGTON, 18 MARCH

The US has asked Syria send forces to eastern Lebanon to disarm the Iran-backed Hezbollah, Reuters reported. However, Syria appeared unwilling to entangle itself in the conflict.

The proposal is a year old, but received renewed push amid the Iran wars.

US envoy for Syria Tom Barrack, who is also ambassador to Turkey, posted on X that the reports was "false and inaccurate."

Meanwhile, Syria's state run-SANA news said that Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud spoke to his Syrian counterpart Assad Hassan al-Shaibani, it is unclear what they discussed. —*Agencies*

Pak takes 'temporary pause' in Afghan war

Taliban rescue workers inspect the airstrike site at a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan on Tuesday —*PTI*

ISLAMABAD, 18 MARCH

- Information Minister Ataullah Tarar said the pause would be applicable from "midnight 18/19 March to midnight 23/24 March".

Pakistan on Wednesday announced a "temporary pause" in the ongoing operation against the Afghan Taliban in view of Eid and at the request of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. This comes a day after the Afghan government accused Islamabad of killing 400 people in an attack on a hospital in Kabul.

Information Minister Ataullah Tarar announced, hours after Pakistan carried out fresh attacks on alleged Taliban positions in the border region.

Tarar said the pause would be applicable from "midnight 18/19 March to midnight 23/24 March". He, however, added that in case of any cross-border attack, drone attack or any terrorist incident inside Pakistan, the operation will immediately resume.

Meanwhile, mass funerals were set to be held in Kabul for some of the victims of the Omid hospital bombing. Victims from elsewhere in Afghanistan would be transported home for burial.

Afghanistan's vast poppy fields have been the source of much of the world's heroin, and that, in combination with decades of conflict and widespread poverty, has fuelled drug addiction that the country's current rulers have vowed to combat.

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen repeated cross-border clashes as well as airstrikes inside Afghanistan, including several in the capital, since it began in late February. —*PTI*

US pressures Cuba govt change amid sanctions

HAVANA, 18 MARCH

US-Cuba tensions escalated, bringing the island's President into focus. The US wants Cuban President **Miguel Díaz-Canel** to step down as a condition for progress in talks, sources said. However, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio dismissed it as "fake", but Cuba "has to get new people in charge".

No detail has been offered about who the administration might like to see come to power.

Many Cubans do not believe that Díaz-Canel holds much power in Cuba, anyway, as opposed to revolutionary founding father Raúl Castro and his family.

The US has tightened sanctions on Venezuela, including curbs on oil exports to Cuba that worsened a nationwide blackout. The developments come as Cuba slowly restored power after a 29-hour outage. Díaz-Canel accused the US of attempting to "suffocate" the economy and vowed "unyielding resistance".

Cuba blames US energy restrictions for its worsening crisis. —*Agencies*

Sassou N'Guesso reelected as President of Congo

BRAZZAVILLE/ BRUSSELS, 18 MARCH

Republic of Congo's President Denis Sassou N'Guesso has been reelected for a fifth term, according to provisional results announced on Tuesday. Sassou N'Guesso, has been in power for 42 years, and is the third-longest-serving African president.

Sassou Nguesso secured 94 per cent of the vote, defeating six challengers. The government shut down the internet throughout the elections.

BELGIUM OKAYS TRIAL IN 1261 KILLING OF PM

A Belgian court ordered on Tuesday that former diplomat Etienne Davignon stand trial for the 1961 assassination of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. Who spearheaded Congo's independence from colonial Belgium in 1960..

Davignon, the last living suspect among 10 Belgians implicated, has denied allegations. While Congolese forces executed Lumumba, questions persist on Belgian and US complicity due to his perceived Communist ties. —*PTI*

'Ukraine missile shortage due to Iran war'

LONDON, 18 MARCH

Ukraine's missile shortage is due to the war in the West Asia, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Tuesday.

Zelenskyy added that US President Donald Trump was not on "any side" in the war but he didn't want to "irritate" Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"For Putin, a long war in Iran is a plus," he said. "It means the depletion of US reserves and air defence manufacturers. So we [Ukraine] have a depletion of resources."

Zelenskyy also spoke in the British Parliament, where he called Russia and Iran "brothers in hatred" and sought support from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer as US-led peace talks have stalled due to the Iran war.

Zelensky said Ukraine has developed cheap, effective defenses, but Trump rejected the offer. —*Agencies*

CUT CHINA DEPENDANCY

US secures Indonesian fuels, minerals

HANOI, 18 MARCH

A new trade pact between Indonesia and the US is set to reshape economic ties, linking Jakarta's resources to Washington's strategic needs.

Under the deal, Indonesia will widen access for US investors in critical minerals, boost purchases of US crude and liquefied petroleum gas, support American coal export corridor, and cooperate on small modular nuclear reactors. In return, Washington will cut a proposed 32 per cent tariff to 19 per cent and grant wider market access, including zero-tariffs for palm oil, coffee, cocoa, spices and rubber.

However, a US Supreme Court ruling against tariffs has cast uncertainty over deal. The pact aligns with US efforts to secure mineral supply and reduce reliance on China.

This puts Indonesia, the largest nickel producer, at the centre of US-China competition.

Indonesia plans to purchase $15 billion in US energy and ease regulations, while also working with the US and Japan on nuclear projects.

Critics warn the deal could slow renewable energy progress and faces hurdles, including parliamentary approval and concerns over halal certification rules. —*PTI*

Crude prices fall by ₹137 to ₹8,734/barrel

Asian refining margins slip into negative territory as Iran war disrupts crude flows

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Crude oil prices declined by Rs 137 to Rs 8,734 per barrel in futures trade on Wednesday as signs of easing supply concerns emerged in the market amid geopolitical tensions.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), crude oil for the March delivery declined by Rs 137, or 1.54 per cent, to Rs 8,734 per barrel in a business turnover of 5,244 lots.

The April contract also dipped by Rs 98, or 1.11 per cent, to Rs 8,746 per barrel in 14,676 lots.

Analysts said crude oil prices remained volatile as markets weighed geopolitical risks against signs of easing supply concerns in the region.

In the overseas market, Brent Oil futures for the May delivery slipped 0.62 per cent to USD 102.78 per barrel, while West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for the same month contract dropped 1.56 per cent to USD 94.04 per barrel in New York.

"WTI crude futures fell below USD 95 per barrel, paring gains from the previous session as investors navigated ongoing hostilities in the Middle East and uncertainty surrounding the Strait of Hormuz," Jigar Trivedi, Senior Research Analyst at IndusInd Securities, said.

Meanwhile, Asian refining margins have turned negative after a brief surge earlier this month, as the ongoing Iran conflict disrupts crude supply chains and forces refiners across the region to cut operating rates.

Benchmark Singapore gross refining margins (GRMs), a key indicator of regional refining profitability, have fallen sharply from multi-year highs of about USD 40-45 per barrel in early March to between negative USD 5 and negative USD 10 per barrel in recent sessions, according to market estimates. The reversal highlights a rapid shift from supply-driven gains to mounting structural stress in the refining sector. *—PTI*

Gujarat's 400 ceramic units shut over gas disruption

As many as 430 ceramic units in Gujarat's Morbi will not operate for at least three weeks as the West Asia conflict has disrupted the supply of gas required in the manufacturing process, a representative of the industry said. Morbi is known as the ceramic city and the world's second-largest hub for ceramic tile production. The West Asian region has been facing military turmoil with the US and Israeli forces engaging in a war against Iran, which has closed the Strait of Hormuz, a major passage. *—PTI*

Ceramic tiles industry to see 1-2% revenue dip

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Indian ceramic tiles industry is expected to witness a 1-2 per cent decline in revenue this fiscal, marking the second consecutive year of fall, due to the war in West Asia, which is affecting production and exports amid supply constraints, Crisil Ratings said on Wednesday.

The ongoing developments in West Asia have a twin impact on the Rs 53,000-crore Indian ceramic tiles industry, the agency said in a statement.

"One, exports to the ME (Middle East) have been impacted by logistical challenges and supply-chain realignment. Notably, exports constitute 40 per cent of the industry's revenue, with the ME accounting for 15 per cent of ceramic exports," it said.

Export revenue may decline 6-7 per cent due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, which has disrupted deliveries and increased freight and insurance costs, the ratings agency noted. This has not only halted exports to ME but also raised the cost of exports to other regions, it added.

On the other hand, Crisil Ratings said, the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and propane has been curtailed, forcing most ceramic plants to either shut down production or operate at significantly reduced levels. *—PTI*

Silver plunges to '2.56L/kg; Gold falls to '1.60L/10g

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Silver prices plunged by Rs 6,000 to Rs 2.56 lakh per kilogram in the national capital on Wednesday, while gold dropped by Rs 1,000 to Rs 1.60 lakh per 10g due to bearish domestic sentiment, according to the All India Sarafa Association. Silver declined by Rs 6,000, or 2.28 per cent, to Rs 2,56,500 per kg (inclusive of all taxes) from Tuesday's closing level of Rs 2,62,500 per kg. In the bullion market, gold of 99.9 per cent purity dipped by Rs 1,000, or 0.62 per cent, to Rs 1,60,300 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes). The yellow metal had closed at Rs 1,61,300 per 10g, up by Rs 1,050. Gold prices declined as a wave of profit booking by traders met lacklustre physical demand, Dilip Parmar, Senior Research Analyst at HDFC Securities, said. Spot silver was trading 0.79 per cent higher at $79.92 per ounce, while gold fell $16.10, or 0.32 per cent, to $4,989.65 per ounce. Investors are closely monitoring outcome of the US Federal Reserve's policy meeting for cues on interest rate trajectory, which is expected to influence policy outlook and gold & silver prices. *—PTI*

Urban Company shares zoom after SBI buys 4% stake

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Shares of Urban Company surged over 13 per cent on Wednesday after SBI Mutual Fund acquired nearly a 4 per cent stake for Rs 632 crore. The stock jumped 13.20 per cent to Rs 124.35 on the BSE and 13.01 per cent to Rs 124.43 on the NSE. SBI MF bought over 5.75 crore shares at Rs 109.83–109.85 apiece via bulk and block deals, raising its holding to 5.87 per cent from 1.89 per cent. Meanwhile, Wellington Management, DF International Partners and ABG Capital sold a combined 4.62 per cent stake for Rs 734 crore. Wellington and DF International exited, while ABG Capital cut its stake to 0.16 per cent. Buyer details remain undisclosed. *—PTI*

Sebi fines 18 entities ₹2.8 cr for share manipulation

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has levied penalties worth Rs 2.8 crore on 18 entities as well as barred them from securities markets for up to five years for manipulating the share prices of Retro Green Revolution Ltd (RGRL). Besides, the regulator has directed 15 of these entities to disgorge the total unlawful gains worth Rs 2.94 crore, along with 12 per cent interest per annum from 31 December, 2021, till the date of payment. The amount is to be deposited in Sebi's Investor Protection and Education Fund within 45 days. Sebi observed that the scheme involved trading among connected entities to create artificial volumes in a thin stock. *—PTI*

Axis Bank to infuse ₹1,500 cr in arm Axis Finance Ltd

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Axis Bank on Wednesday said it has approved the proposal to infuse Rs 1,500 crore in its NBFC arm Axis Finance Ltd (AFL) via rights issue over next one year to fund business growth. The Acquisitions, Divestments and Merger Committee of the Board of Directors of the bank at their meeting on March 18, 2026, has approved the proposal to infuse Rs 1,500 crore in AFL in one or more tranches before March 31, 2027, Axis Bank said in a regulatory filing. The infusion would be subscribing to the rights issue of AFL — a wholly owned subsidiary of the bank, it said. *—PTI*

3,202 STOCKS ADVANCE

Investors get richer by Rs 9.18L cr as mkts rally for 3 days

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Equity investors' wealth surged by Rs 9.18 lakh crore in three days of market rebound amid value buying and recovery in global benchmark indices.

In the past three trading days, the 30-share BSE Sensex has rallied 2,140.21 points or 2.87 per cent. On Wednesday, the Sensex jumped 633.29 points or 0.83 per cent to settle at 76,704.13.

The 50-share NSE Nifty surged 196.65 points or 0.83 per cent to end at 23,777.80.

Following the recovery in equities, the market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies surged by Rs 9,18,579.57 crore to Rs 4,39,00,831.84 crore (USD 4.75 trillion) in three days.

Global cues remained constructive, with overnight gains in US equities setting the tone, followed by firm trends across Asian markets and positive indications from European bourses

From the 30-Sensex firms, Eternal, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Adani Ports, HCL Tech, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services and Axis Bank were among the major gainers on Wednesday.

NTPC, Hindustan Unilever, Sun Pharma and HDFC Bank were among the laggards.

The BSE MidCap Select index jumped 2.39 per cent, and the SmallCap Select index climbed 1.59 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, BSE Focused IT surged 2.95 per cent, IT (2.82 per cent), realty (2.67 per cent), BSE MidSmall Private Banks Quality Tilt (2.48 per cent), services (2.45 per cent), telecommunication (2.44 per cent) and consumer discretionary (2.08 per cent).

Metal emerged as the only laggard.

A total of 3,202 stocks advanced, while 1,088 declined and 142 remained unchanged on the BSE. *—PTI*

WORLD MARKETS

DOW (US)	46,601.30	(0.84%)
S&P 500 (US)	6,702.39	(0.52%)
Nasdaq (US)	22,350.10	(0.58%)
Nikkei (Japan)	55,239.40	(2.87%)
Hang Seng CHN	26,025.43	(0.61%)
DAX (Germany)	23,496.90	(0.99%)
FTSE 100 (UK)	10,283.36	(1.16%)
CAC 40 (Paris)	7,977.17	(0.03%)
KOSPI S Korea	5,925.03	(5.04%)

Rupee crashes to new low of 92.89 against USD

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

The rupee slumped 49 paise to close at a record low of 92.89 against the US dollar on Wednesday, weighed down by a stronger greenback and sustained FII outflows.

Elevated crude oil prices in global markets amid intensifying conflict in West Asia further dampened sentiments, forex traders said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 92.42 against the greenback and traded in the range of 92.41-92.89 before closing at its record low of 92.89, sharply down by 49 paise from its previous close.

Earlier on Tuesday, the domestic hit its previous lowest intra-day level of 92.47 against the dollar before settling at an all-time low of 92.40.

"The rupee hit a new low ahead of the major central banks meetings... as the Reserve Bank of India allowed the 92.50 level to be breached," Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP, said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.05 per cent higher at 99.62.

Foreign institutional investors sold equities worth Rs 2,714.35 crore on a net basis on Wednesday, according to exchange data. *—PTI*

- Elevated crude oil prices in global markets amid intensifying conflict in West Asia further dampened sentiments, forex traders said.

Twitter case: Musk accused of stock crash

SAN FRANCISCO, 18 MARCH

Closing arguments concluded Tuesday in a trial pitting Elon Musk against Twitter shareholders who say the world's richest man engaged in a pattern of deceptive behaviour that misled investors as he attempted to back out of his USD 44 billion deal to buy the social media platform in 2022.

The civil trial in San Francisco centres on a class-action lawsuit filed just before Musk took control of Twitter, which he later renamed X, in October 2022, six months after agreeing to buy the embattled company for USD 44 billion, or USD 54.20 per share. The price represents a sliver of the Tesla CEO's fortune, now estimated at USD 839 billion.

Much of the trial focused on Musk's claims about the number of bots on Twitter. Musk testified, as he long contended, that Twitter had a much higher number of fake and spam accounts than the 5 per cent it disclosed in regulatory filings. He used what he called Twitter's misrepresentation of the number of fake accounts on its service as a reason to retreat from the purchase.

After Musk tried to back out, Twitter went to court in Delaware to force him to honour his original deal. Just before that case was scheduled to go to trial, Musk reversed course again and agreed to pay what he had originally promised. *—PTI*

Cabinet approves Rs 2,585 crore scheme for small hydro projects

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Centre on Wednesday decided to provide up to 30 per cent of the project cost, or up to Rs 3.6 crore per MW, in aid for small hydro projects under a new Rs 2,585 crore scheme for the development of about 1,500 MW clean energy capacity.

The Union Cabinet, in its meeting on Wednesday, cleared the Small Hydro Power Development Scheme with an outlay of Rs 2,585 crore for five years from 2026-27 to 2030-31, an official statement said.

The scheme is expected to attract about Rs 15,000 crore in investment in small hydro projects of up to 25 MW capacity.

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the 'Small Hydro Power (SHP) Development Scheme for period FY 2026-27 to FY 2030-31' with an outlay of Rs 2584.60 crore for installation of SHP projects of an approximate capacity of 1500 MW, the statement said.

The scheme will support small hydro projects (between 1-25 MW capacity) to come up in different states and will especially benefit hilly and North Eastern states with high potential for such projects.

In North Eastern States and in districts with international border, central financial assistance to the tune of Rs 3.6 crore per MW or 30 per cent of the project cost, whichever is lower, with an upper limit of Rs 30 crore per project will be available, it stated.

In other states, Rs 2.4 crore per MW or 20 per cent of project cost, whichever is lower, with a cap of Rs 20 crore per project, would be available. *—PTI*

Sterling case: Lenders move SC over Rs 5K cr dues

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

A consortium of secured lenders, including banks of Sterling Biotech Ltd of promoters Chetan and Nitin Sandesara, has moved the Supreme Court for disbursal of their claim amounts from Rs 5,100 crore deposited in the apex court registry, while highlighting their total outstanding against the Group companies was at Rs 19,283.77 crore.

A bench of Justices JK Maheshwari and AS Chandurkar, which on Monday took on record the joint application filed by the consortium led by the State Bank of India, while asking it to be served to Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, listed the matter for further hearing on 23 March.

The application stated that the claims relate to exposures across 10 companies of the Sterling group, including Sterling Biotech Ltd, Sterling Oil Resources Ltd, Sterling SEZ Ltd and other domestic and overseas entities.

The lenders further stated that the claims were consolidated following a series of joint meetings, where a uniform formula was agreed upon for calculating total dues and apportioning the deposited amount. *—PTI*

SOLD ON FACEBOOK

Meta moves HC against fine for walkie-talkie sale

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Meta Platforms Inc on Wednesday assailed in the Delhi High Court a Central Consumer Protection Authority order imposing a Rs 10 lakh penalty on it for alleged unauthorised sale and listing of walkie-talkies on the Facebook Marketplace.

The senior counsel for Meta submitted that, unlike Amazon and Flipkart, Facebook was not an e-market but merely a "notice board", and therefore, the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has no jurisdiction over it.

Justice Purushaindra Kumar Kaurav listed Meta's petition for hearing on March 25, asking it to explain how the order can be termed "without jurisdiction".

Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, appearing for Meta, argued that Facebook neither provides a mechanism for sale and purchase nor does it charge any commission from the users, as it is not an e-commerce platform.

In its order passed on 1 January, 2026, the CCPA held that Meta violated the Consumer Protection Act and its rules and the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules by allegedly permitting walkie-talkie listings on Facebook Marketplace without mandatory disclosures.

In its petition, Meta said Facebook Marketplace is a free service designed exclusively for natural persons to sell or exchange goods in a personal capacity, and businesses and commercial sellers are not allowed to create listings. *—PTI*

6G to drive next leap in human civilisation: Scindia

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The era of 6G will mark the next leap in human civilisation, Communications Minister **Jyotiraditya Scindia** said on Wednesday, emphasising that global interoperability across networks, devices, and services, a common technical framework, accelerated innovation, and a strong commitment to inclusivity would be key to unlocking full potential of technology.

Speaking at an international workshop on 6G standardisation, the minister noted that the world is at the threshold of a new technological epoch.The era of 6G will not only represent an exponential jump in speeds and latency but also the next leap for human civilisation from both digital and technology perspectives, he said. He emphasised the need for a multi-pronged approach, underlining four key elements.

"Our decisive role has to be based on four key pillars. First to ensure global interoperability between devices, networks and services. And this has to be the case across the world so the world communicates seamlessly across a global unified communication ecosystem," he said. *—PTI*

-PTI

Japan beats SK 4-1 to set up final against Australia

SYDNEY, 18 MARCH

Riko Ueki and Maika Hamano scored first-half goals to set Japan on course for a 4-1 victory over South Korea on Wednesday and a spot in the Women's Asian Cup final against Australia.Japan dominated the semifinal at Sydney's Stadium Australia against a South Korea line-up that edged the Australians on goal difference in the group stage after both teams finished with two wins and a draw apiece.Japan thought it had gone ahead 3-0 before half-time with Aoba Fujino finding the back of the net in the 43rd minute, but the goal was disallowed after a VAR review.Asia's top-ranked team at No. 7 in the FIFA list, Japan, increased its tally to 27 goals in the continental championship—*PTI*

Anahat targets Squash top 10 after Asian success

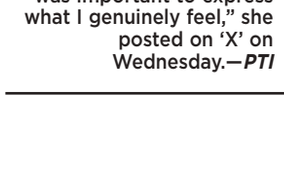
MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Having become the youngest Asian to enter the top-20 of world squash rankings, 17-year-old Anahat Singh knows that breaking the top-10 barrier will be a lot harder as she chases excellence at the highest level.Dipika Pallikal and Joshna Chinappa reached as high as 10th in the PSA rankings but were not able to make further inroads. With age and special talent on her side, 20th-ranked Anahat can do what no Indian has done before."I know it's going to be quite tough; breaking into the top 20 wouldn't be as hard as it would be to get into the top 10 because now that you're at a high stage, even going up by one spot is quite tough," Anahat told PTI on the sidelines of the Indian Open.—*PTI*

Flick says Barcelona will be his last coaching job

BARCELONA, 18 MARCH

Barcelona may be the last team Hansi Flick coaches. Flick said on Tuesday that he doesn't plan to coach anymore after his stint with Barcelona ends. He spoke ahead of Wednesday's Champions League round-of-16 match against Newcastle. The teams drew 1-1 in England last week.
Newly re-elected club president Joan Laporta said he plans to extend the German coach's contract until 2028. Flick said it's not the time to discuss renewing his contract, which ends in 2027, but hinted he was keen to end his career at Barcelona. "Everyone knows I'm happy here, but I also need to talk with my family," the 61-year-old Flick said.—*PTI*



-PTI

Humpy unsure of Candidates participation

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Indian Grandmaster Koneru Humpy remains undecided about competing in the prestigious Candidates Tournament in Cyprus this month, but reiterated her concerns about the safety situation in the host country amid the conflict in West Asia. The Candidates, which will decide the challengers to the world championship crowns currently held by D Gukesh (men) and Ju Wenjun (women), is scheduled to begin on 28 March. "I know that alone, I may not be able to change anything. But regardless of whether I play in the Candidates or not, I felt it was important to express what I genuinely feel," she posted on 'X' on Wednesday.—*PTI*

Can't play all your life, so education is important: Sindhu

Two-time Olympic medal-winning Indian badminton ace P V Sindhu –*PTI*

GURUGRAM, 18 MARCH

Two-time Olympic medal-winning Indian badminton ace P V Sindhu on Wednesday stressed the need for aspiring athletes to have a good education, warning that it is too "risky" to ignore academics and focus solely on a sporting career that can end with a single injury.

The former world champion made these remarks in a fireside conversation at DPS International, while speaking to educationist Devyani Jaipuria.

The Hyderabadi touched upon several aspects of her own journey to drive home the point, including the self-doubt that she battled before the 2016 Olympics after being laid low by a stress fracture of the left foot. "I have been playing for so many years. At some point in time, you have to retire, right? And that's the truth. You can't be playing sport when you're 45 or 50 or 60 at the highest level.

"And you have to accept that fact, whereas education will always be lifelong with you, and that will always stay with you," she said, echoing a sentiment expressed by national coach Pullela Gopichand, who has urged parents of aspiring athletes to prioritise education. "Nobody is born with a golden spoon, and you have to work hard, whether it is in studies or sports...Studies and sports are equally important. I have done my MBA. So, I know, like, it's not easy...you go to training in the morning, come back, study, and then you go for evening sessions.

"Because at the end of the day, that is the truth, where sports is a very small thing, right? Life-long, you know, you will always have an education by your side. Sport is also important, but not to the point that you completely stop your studies," she asserted. —*PTI*

Varun, Sunil Narine absolute cannons for KKR

Should get a friendly track at Eden Gardens: Du Plessis

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

An underwhelming T20 World Cup campaign notwithstanding, Indian mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy would be crucial for Kolkata Knight Riders in the IPL beginning on 28 March, former South African captain Faf du Plessis has said on Wednesday.

Du Plessis, who played for Chennai Super Kings, Delhi Capitals and Royal Challengers Bengaluru before retiring from the tournament, told 'JioHotStar' that the Eden Gardens pitch should be tailor-made for Sunil Narine and Chakaravarthy.

"If I were part of the KKR team management, I would ask the groundsman at Eden Gardens to make the wicket spin-friendly. KKR are blessed to have two absolute cannons in Varun Chakaravarthy and Sunil Narine," he said.

"They are two of the best T20 spinners in the game right now. Both Varun and Narine have to be in the game. If they play on surfaces where they are not in contention, then you are losing those two cannons and your superpower.

Chakravarthy wasn't particularly effective during India's title-winning campaign at the T20 World Cup, taking 14 wickets at an above-average economy rate of over 9.

KKR finished third from bottom on the points table last season after winning just five of their 14 games. The Ajinkya Rahane-led team will open their campaign against the Mumbai Indians on 29 March in an away fixture.

Du Plessis said another player who could prove crucial for the side is Cameron Green, even though he warned that the Australian all-rounder would be under tremendous pressure given his Rs 25.2 crore contract.

Ponting approves late arrival of Jansen

Punjab Kings head coach Ricky Ponting has approved the late arrival of Marco Jansen for the IPL, considering that the South African all-rounder was among the last batch of players who departed late from India following the T20 World Cup due to logistical issues.

South Africa and West Indies players were stuck in India for more than a week after concluding their World Cup campaigns. Some of them, including West Indies head coach Daren Sammy and Proteas batter David Miller, also expressed frustration over the delay in their departure from India, citing restricted operations at major airports such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi amid the West Asia conflict. —*PTI*

THOMAS & UBER CUP 2026

India men's and women's teams placed in Group A

THAILAND, 18 MARCH

The Indian badminton teams were placed in challenging groups during the Thomas & Uber Cup 2026 draw, which was held in Denmark on Wednesday.

The upcoming Thomas & Uber Cup will be held from 24 April to 3 May at the Forum Horsens Arena in Denmark.

The Indian men's badminton team, who won the 2022 edition of the Thomas Cup, have been placed in Group A alongside defending champions the People's Republic of China, Canada, and Australia for the upcoming edition of the tournament.

Indonesia the runners-up from the previous edition and the most successful team in Thomas Cup history with 14 titles are placed in Group D along with France, Thailand, and Algeria.

India's only Thomas Cup triumph in 2022 came after they had famously defeated Indonesia 3-0 in the final at Bangkok, Thailand.

Paris 2024 semi-finalist Lakshya Sen, former world No. 1 Kidambi Srikanth, and Satwiksairaj Rankireddy-Chirag Shetty won their respective matches to hand India a clean sweep against Indonesia en route to the famous win. India secured qualification for the Thomas Cup 2026 courtesy of their position in the BWF men's team world badminton rankings, which were finalised after the Badminton Asia Team Champion ships. —*PTI*

Srikanth crashes out; Kharb, Tanvi advance in Orleans Masters Badminton

ORLEANS, 18 MARCH

Kidambi Srikanth suffers a first-round defeat, while young talents like Ayush Shetty, Anmol Kharb, and Tanvi Sharma secure wins at Orleans Masters 2026. Former World No. 1 Kidambi Srikanth suffered a first-round exit at the Orleans Masters 2026 after going down in straight games to Denmark's Magnus Johannesen in Orleans, France, on Wednesday. Ranked 30th in the world, Srikanth made a bright start, opening up a 5-2 lead in the first game. However, Johannesen quickly took control, moving ahead 11-6 at the interval before wrapping up the opener 21-12, according to Olympics.com.

The Dane continued his dominance in the second game, overcoming a brief challenge from the Indian to reel off nine consecutive points and seal a 21-10 win in just 26 minutes. While Srikanth's campaign ended early, several Indian shuttlers progressed to the next round with impressive performances.

In men's singles, Ayush Shetty battled past compatriot Kiran George in a three-game contest. After dropping the first game 17-21, Shetty responded strongly to take the next two 21-10, 21-17 and advance to the second round.

In the women's singles draw, Anmol Kharb registered a commanding straight-games win over Turkiye's Neslihan Arin, prevailing 21-12, 21-16. Malvika Bansod also progressed after defeating Chinese Taipei's Sung Shuo-yun 21-18, 21-14.

Teenager Tanvi Sharma delivered one of the biggest upsets of the day, knocking out second seed Supanida Katethong. The Thai player retired midway through the second game with Sharma leading 21-18, 14-12.

However, it was not a successful day for all Indian players. Rakshitha Ramraj and Devika Sihag bowed out in the opening round after losses to Japan's Manami Suizu and Hong Kong, China's Lo Sin Yan, respectively.

In mixed doubles, the Indian pair of Dhruv Kapila and Tanisha Crasto also exited early, losing 21-14, 21-18 to Indonesia's Dejan Ferdinansyah and Bernadine Wardana. —*PTI*

SOME PLAYERS SOUGHT ASYLUM

Iran's women soccer team returns home

DUBAI, 18 MARCH

Iran's national women's soccer team has returned to the Islamic Republic after several of the players sought asylum in Australia, Iranian media reported on Wednesday.

The outlets shared footage of the players entering Iran after landing in Turkey and taking a bus to the border.

They were greeted by some officials at the border.Two Iranian female players, Fatemeh Pasandideh and Atefeh Ramezanisadeh, chose to remain in Australia and have been training with the Brisbane Roar club.

Others who initially sought asylum after the team was knocked out of the Women's Asian Cup later changed their minds and said they would return to Iran.Iran's squad arrived in Australia for the tournament shortly before the Iran-Iraq War began on 28 February. The team initially gained global attention after some players stayed silent during Iran's national anthem before their first game in the Asian Cup. The silence was cast as an act of resistance or protest by some commentators and a show of mourning by others.The players didn't publicly disclose their views or explain their actions and sang the anthem before their next two matches. —*PTI*

Babar, Fakhar suspected unfit during T20 WC selection

KARACHI, 18 MARCH

The medical panel of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) suspects that senior players, Babar Azam and Fakhar Zaman, might not have been 100 per cent fit when they were picked in the T20 World Cup squad.

The same concerns were raised by senior selector Aaqib Javed at a media conference last week, and he said the board would investigate the matter.

A source close to the board said that Dr Javed Mughal, a UK-based consultant on sports physiotherapy and medicine, who joined the PCB medical panel as director of sports exercise and medicine in January, has expressed his concerns after examining Babar and Fakhar after the World Cup. The matter came to light when Babar refused to play in the National T20 Championship after returning from the World Cup, citing hamstring irritation, while Fakhar dealt with similar issues.

"When Babar was examined, his injury turned out to be more serious than initially diagnosed, while Fakhar also has been struggling with the same problem for months now," the source said. —*PTI*

Senegal stripped of Africa Cup of Nations title

DAKAR, 18 MARCH

Senegal has been dramatically stripped of its AFCON title after CAF upheld Morocco's protest, ruling that Senegal's decision to walk off the pitch in protest of a late Moroccan penalty constituted a breach of competition regulations.

In a highly unusual verdict, CAF awarded Morocco a 3-0 win along with the trophy, determining that Senegal's abandonment of the match directly impacted the outcome of the final. Such retrospective punishments are rare but not without precedent. Here are five other instances where teams lost titles after initially winning them.

Marseille secured both Ligue 1 and the Champions League that season, but was later stripped of the domestic title after a match-fixing scandal came to light. Club president Bernard Tapie was found to have orchestrated a 250,000 franc bribe to Valenciennes players Christophe Robert, Jorge Burruchaga, and Jacques Glassmann to underperform in a decisive fixture.

Valenciennes lost the match, confirming Marseille's title, but Glassmann reported the incident after rejecting the offer. As a result, Marseille was relegated to Ligue 2.

Second-placed Paris Saint-Germain declined to be awarded the title, reportedly due to concerns from owners Canal+ over potential broadcasting losses in Marseille. —*PTI*

-PTI

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Real Madrid and PSG advance to QFs

MANCHESTER, 18 MARCH

Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior celebrates scoring against Manchester City in the Champions League at the Etihad Stadium -*X/@REALMADRID*

Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain quickly snuffed out hopes of epic comebacks by Manchester City and Chelsea in the Champions League.

Instead, it was tiny Bodo/Glimt on the receiving end of a historic second-leg fightback in the round of 16.

Protecting three-goal leads from the first leg, Madrid won 2-1 at City helped by an early red card to City captain Bernardo Silva through two goals from Vinícius Júnior to advance 5-1 on aggregate and defending champion PSG scored twice in the first 14 minutes on the way to a 3-0 victory at Chelsea. That sealed an 8-2 aggregate success. Real Madrid and PSG advance to QFs Bodo/Glimt, the Norwegian club from a fishing town of around 55,000 people north of the Arctic Circle, also had a 3-0 lead from the first leg but was blown away 5-0 by Sporting Lisbon after extra time.

There's only been one bigger comeback in the Champions League: Barcelona's storied "Remontada" against PSG in 2016-17. Sporting's reward is a quarterfinal matchup with Arsenal, which beat Bayer Leverkusen 2-0 to secure a 3-1 aggregate win and keep alive its hopes of a quadruple of trophies this season. It's the fourth time in five years that Madrid has eliminated City from the Champions League, and this one was realistically over when Silva was shown a red card in the 20th minute after a video review for sticking out his elbow on the goal-line to block a shot from Vinícius. —*PTI*

Marijne charts build-up for WC

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

India women's hockey team chief coach Sjoerd Marijne is banking on a mix of overseas tours, competitive exposure, and national camps to prepare the side for the World Cup and Asian Games this year.

The World Cup is scheduled to be held in Belgium and the Netherlands in August, while the Asian Games will take place in Japan in September.

The Indian women's team will compete in the FIH Hockey Nations Cup in Auckland from June 15 to 21. They are also scheduled to tour the United States and Argentina, and play matches against Germany and the Netherlands.

"We have a tour to the USA and Argentina, the Nations Cup in New Zealand, and practice matches in Germany. We will also play some matches in the Netherlands," Marijne said in a media release.

"These scheduled games combined with our camps set us up for a very good mix of matches and training to be ready for the World Cup and Asian Games."

India has been placed in Pool D alongside England, China. —*PTI*